# System

ABUSE OF
FLOWER
COMES AS
NO SURPRISE
We Are Building Our Future Together No.61
Napoli, 2021
Nous construisons notre avenir ensemble N°61
Naples, 2021
LA RATP
INVITE
JUERGEN TELLER
i need to live*
16 DÉC. 23–9 JAN. 24
Exposition
GRAND PALAIS
ÉPHÉMÈRE
La RATP
fait la part belle
à la photographie
dans ses espaces

À l'occasion de l'exposition *i need to live**, à ce jour la plus importante dédiée à Juergen Teller, la RATP vous invite à découvrir le style direct et réaliste de ce photographe qui aspire à célébrer la valeur de l'Humain. Juergen Teller, photographe allemand, est internationalement reconnu pour ses portraits de célébrités, ses photographies de mode et ses campagnes pour de grands couturiers. Depuis ses débuts à Londres dans les années 1990, il a également réalisé de nombreuses séries d'œuvres personnelles dans lesquelles il se met en scène pour mieux s'interroger sur sa vie, ses racines et son identité.

**j'ai besoin de vivre*

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# That's Entertainment!

Issue No. 22 – £28 / €32
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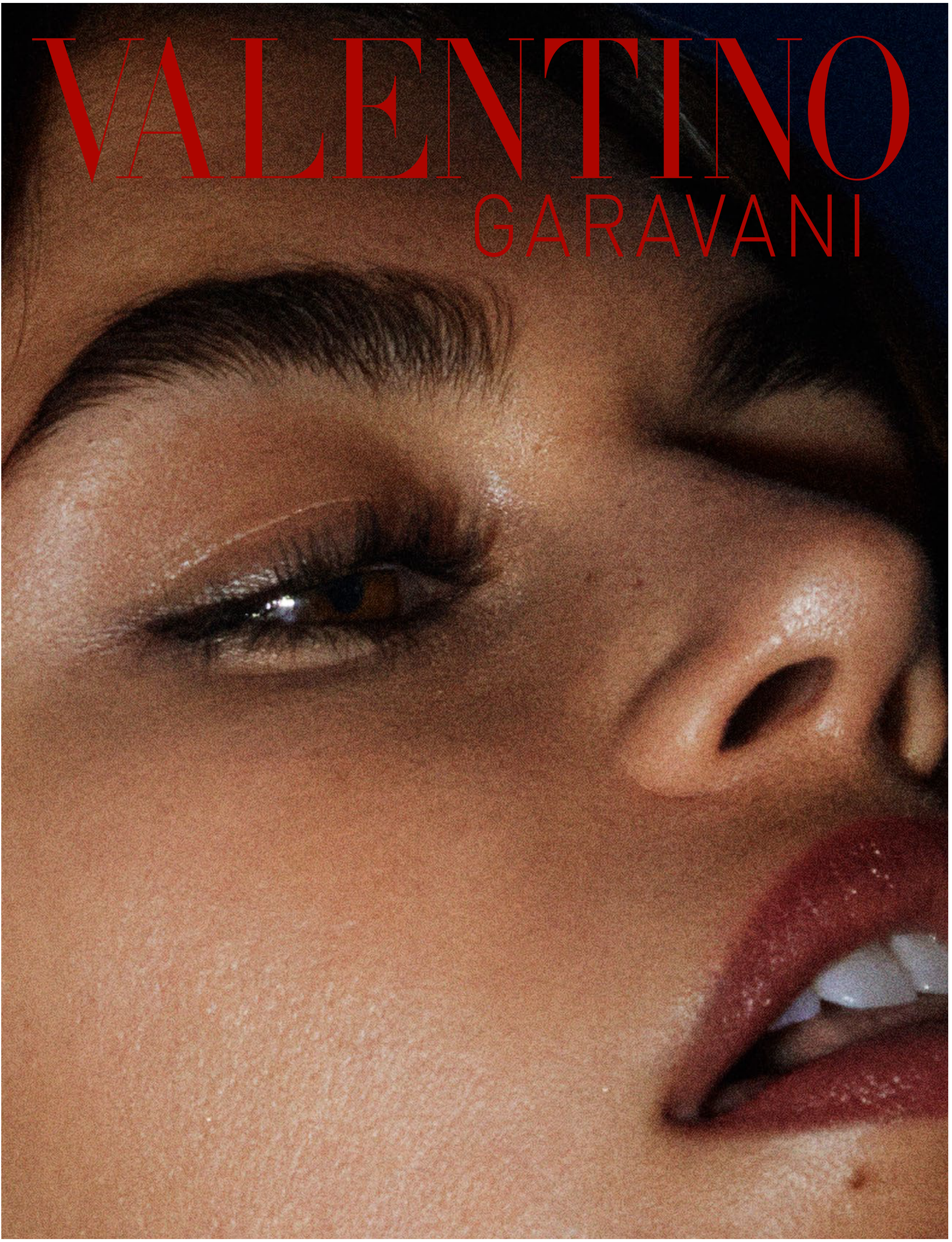
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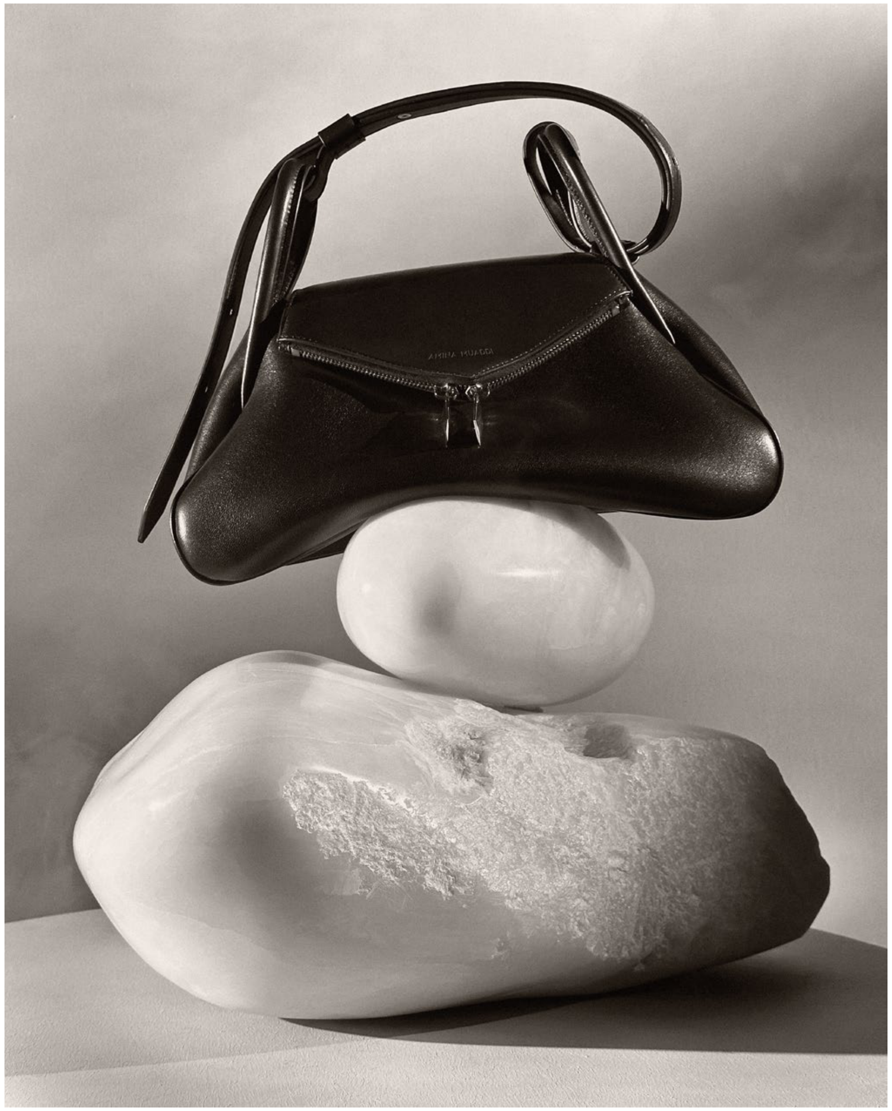

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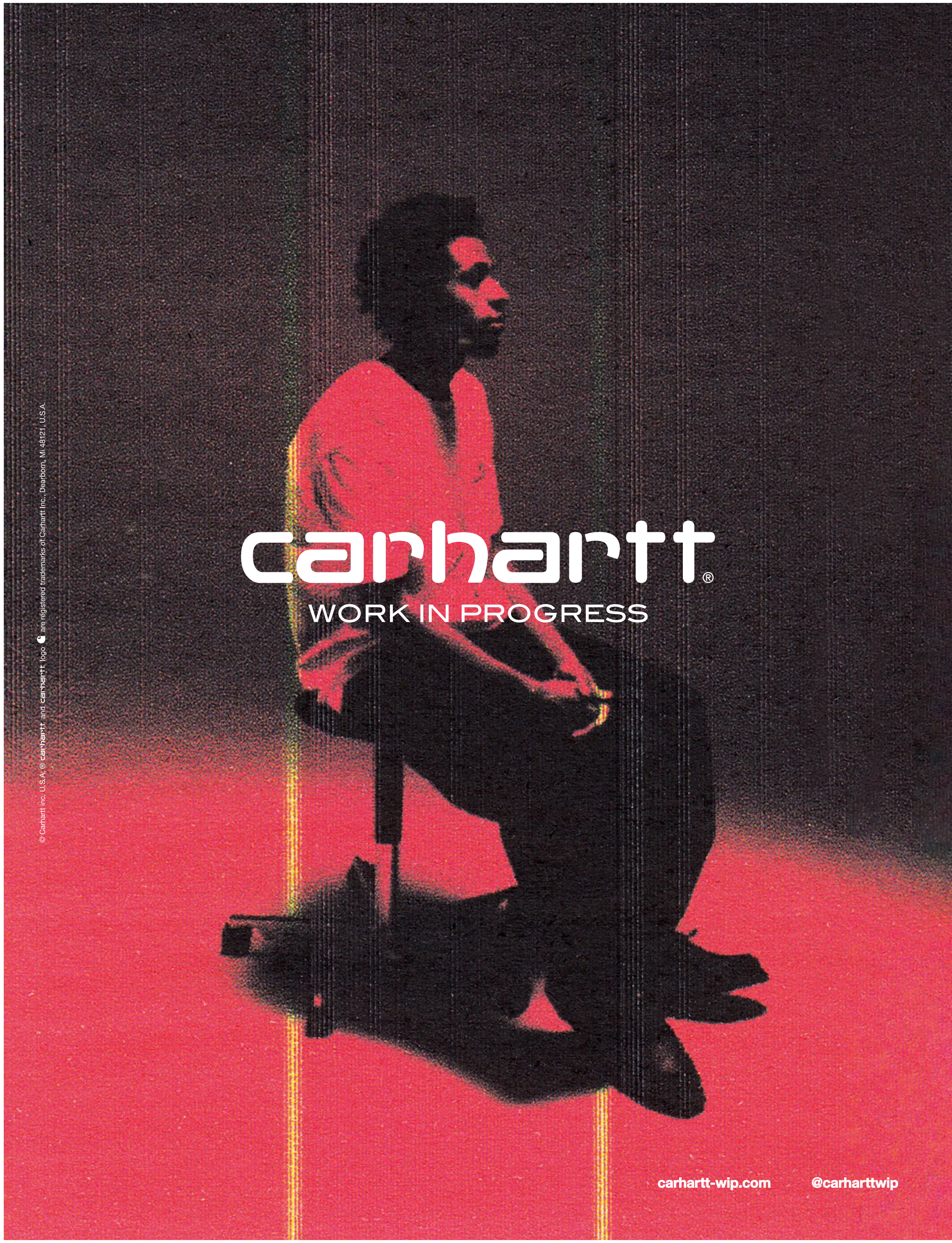

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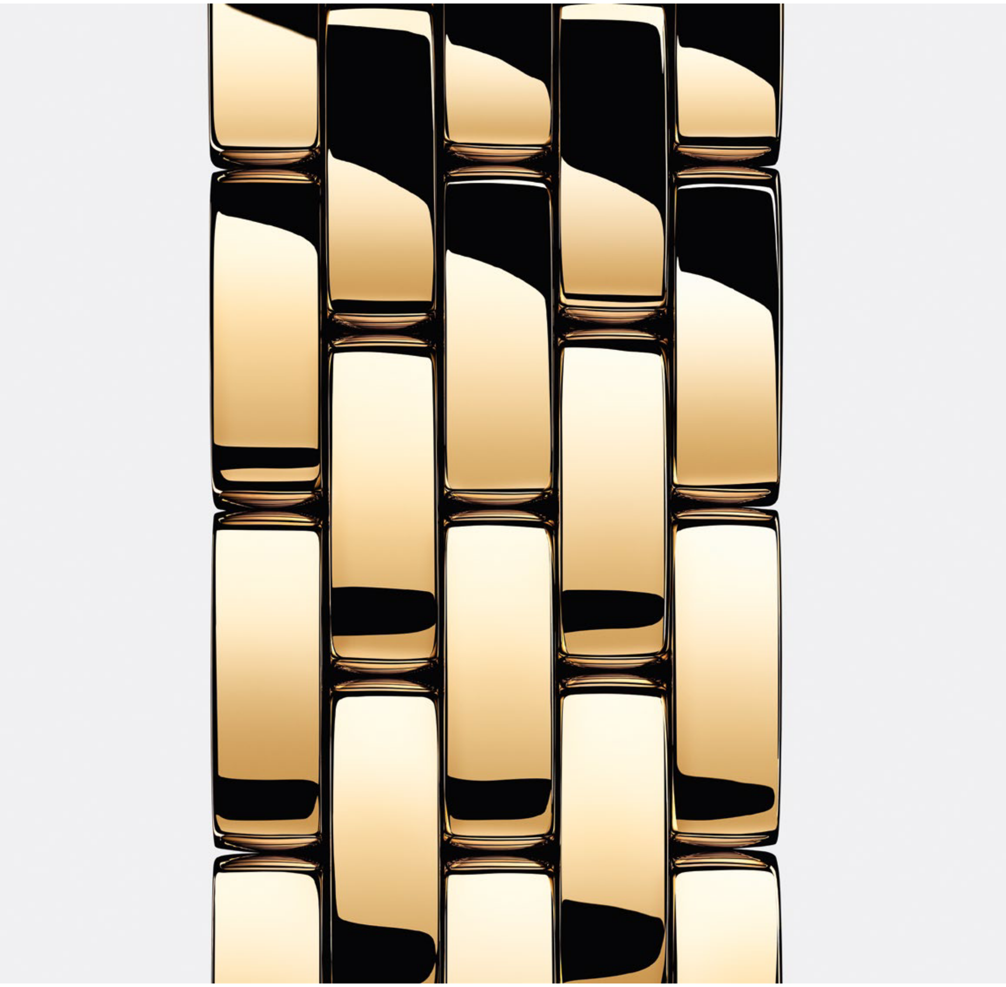

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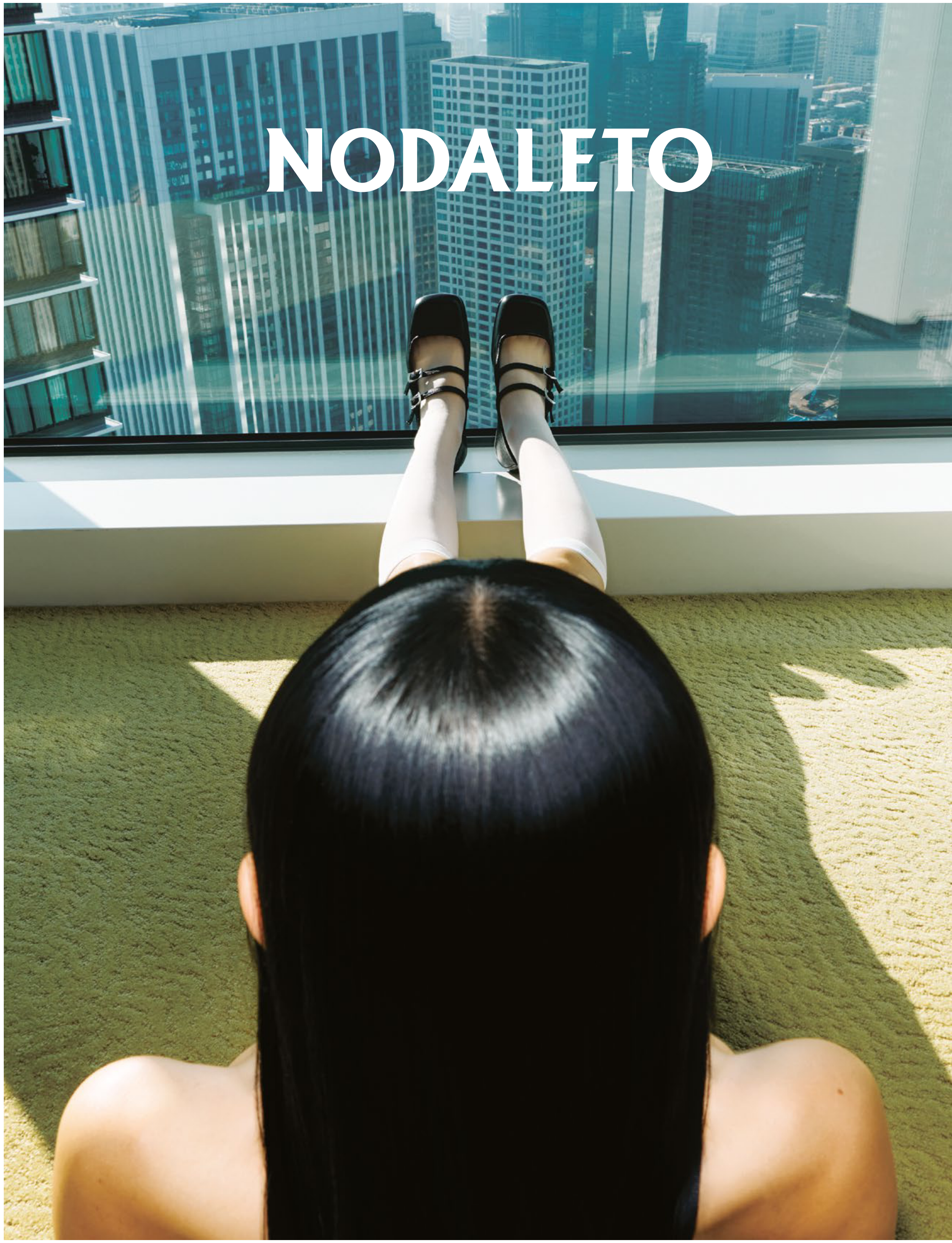

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More than ever, fashion's popularity hinges on its capacity to wed itself to the prevailing kings and queens of mainstream entertainment: the stars of cinema and TV, music and sport, as well as the digital world's scrappier but no-less-adored luminaries. By doing this, fashion itself is behaving increasingly like – and being widely perceived as – another form of mass entertainment. As such, when it comes to vying for attention, the average fashion mega-show now tussles with all the big guns: Oscars night, the Super Bowl half-time show, royal weddings, Hollywood blockbusters, Netflix's latest streaming sensation, stadium pop... And it often wins. 'Today, digital impressions of the big shows are measured in the hundreds of millions,' veteran fashion-show creative producer Alexandre de Betak points out on page 164. 'Pharrell's debut Vuitton show surpassed a billion – that's an eighth of the planet.'

For many years, the subjects of this issue of *System* – the entertainment world's agents, publicists, managers, wranglers, dressers, and indeed, leading talent; our cover star Pharrell being the perfect case in point – operated on the periphery of fashion's slightly impenetrable top table. These days though, they have become central and essential, courted by fashion's major players, and in the case of talent behemoth CAA, acquired for $7 billion by François-Henri Pinault. Because right now, that's fashion. Or rather, that's entertainment. Or both.

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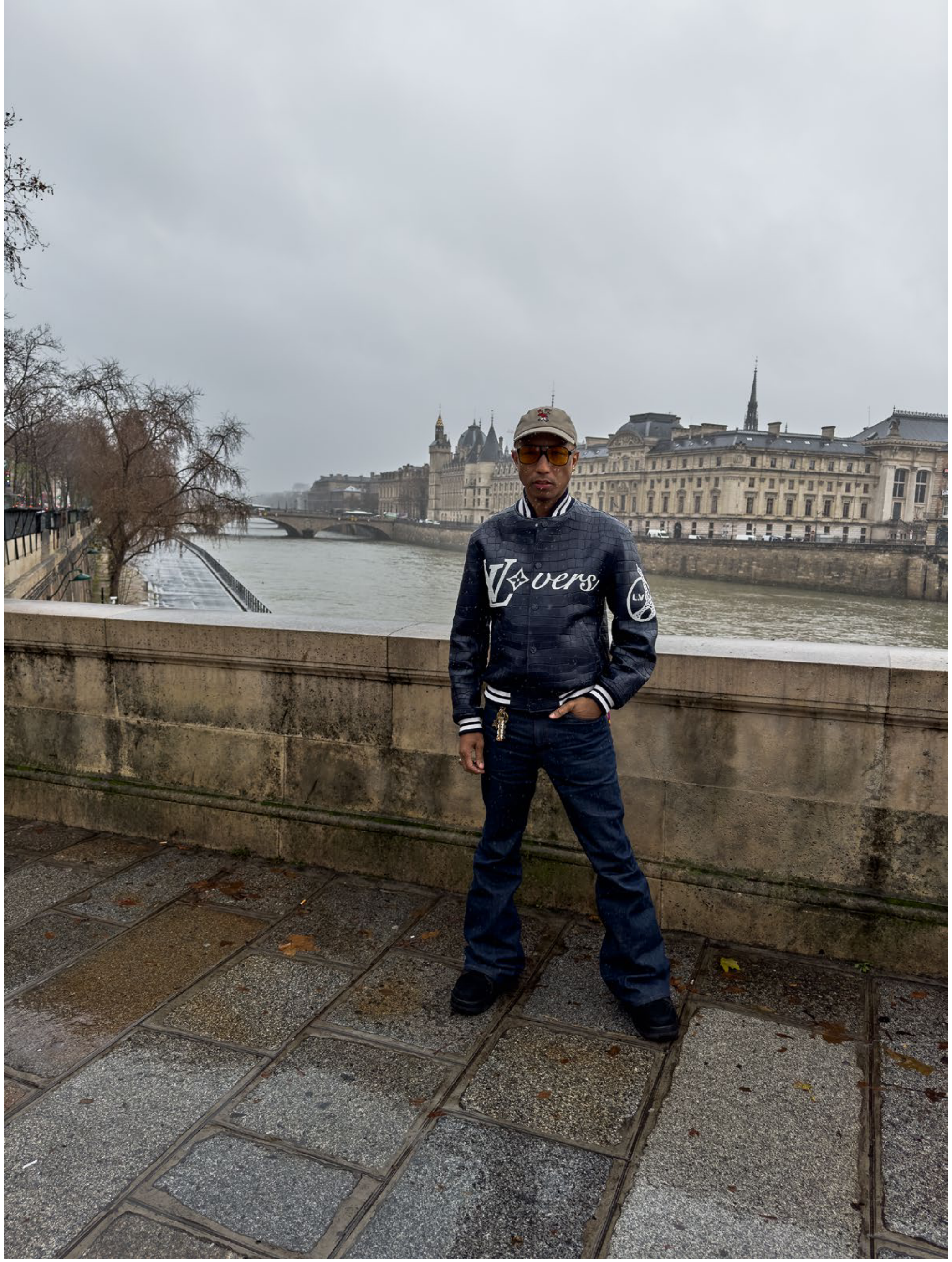
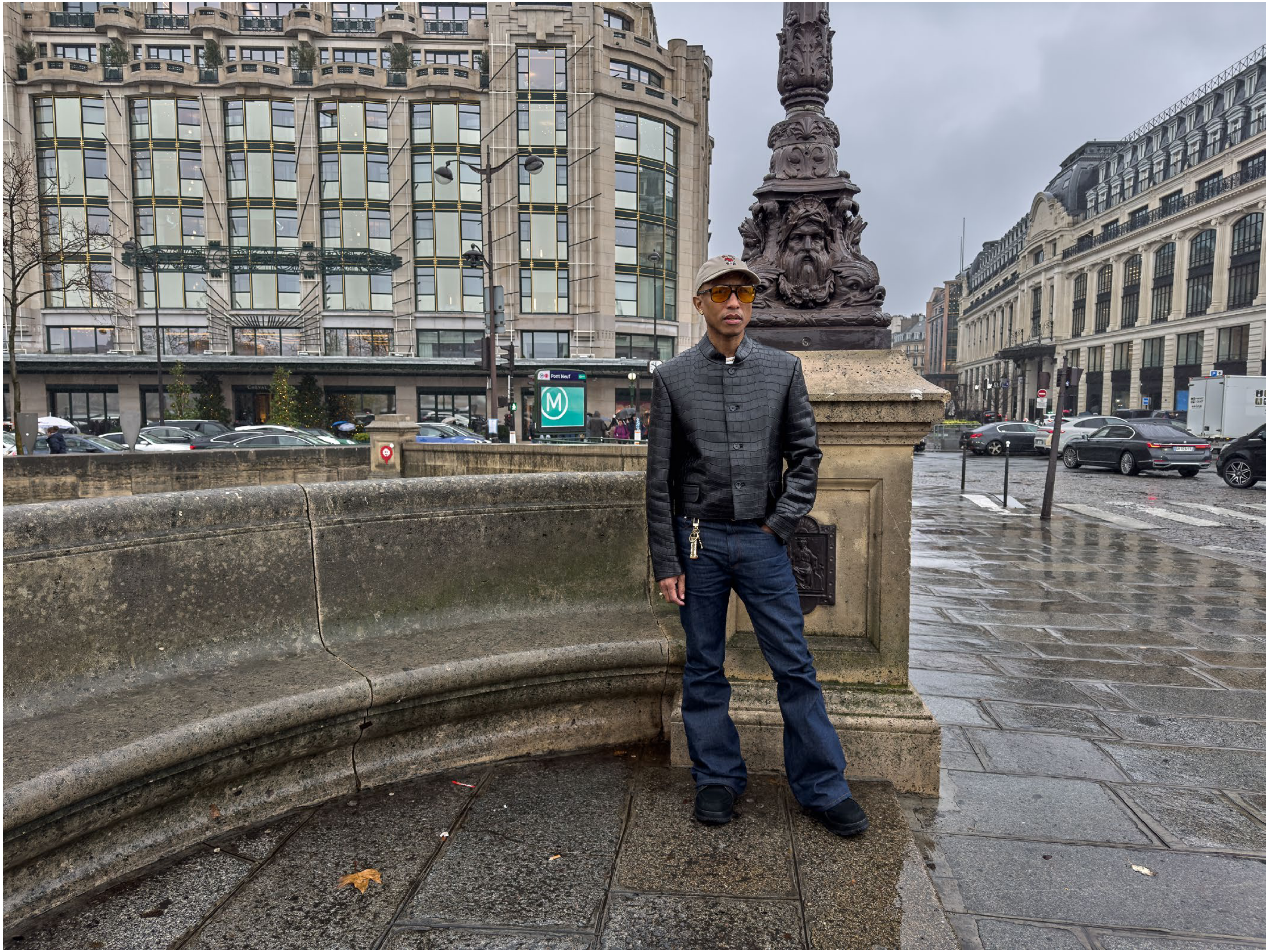
# ‘This moment is super-surreal.’

## Pharrell in Paris, by Juergen.

**Photographs and layout by Juergen Teller**
**Creative partner Dovile Drizyte**



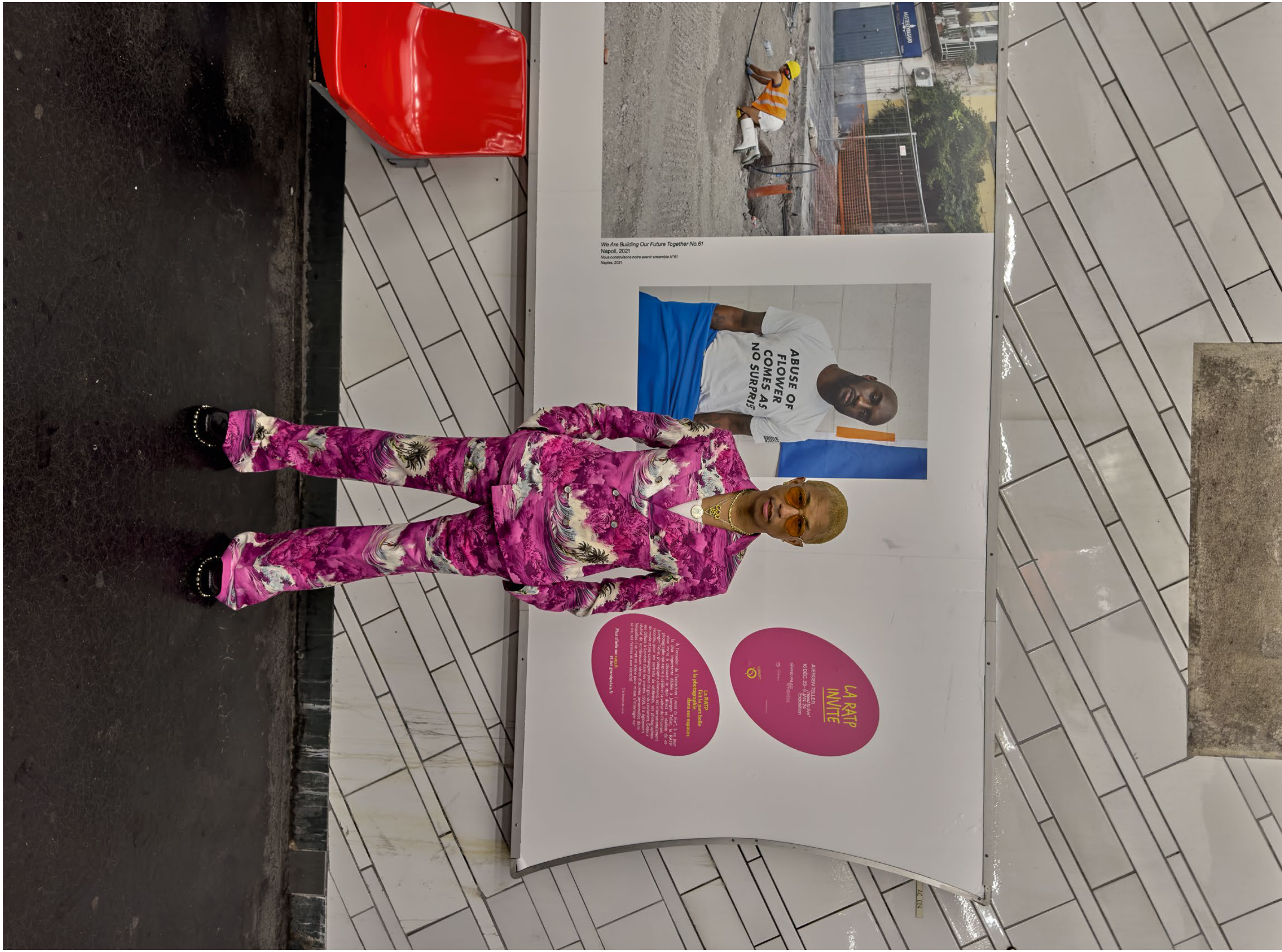


Previous page: LV Lovers varsity blouson, sailor flared denim pants, and derby shoes.

Leather jacket, sailor flared denim pants, and derby shoes.

Hotel de Vi
"GRASS"
Virgil Abloh No.44
London, 2018
more hair
skinnier

LV surf tailored
double breasted jacket,
sailor flared pants.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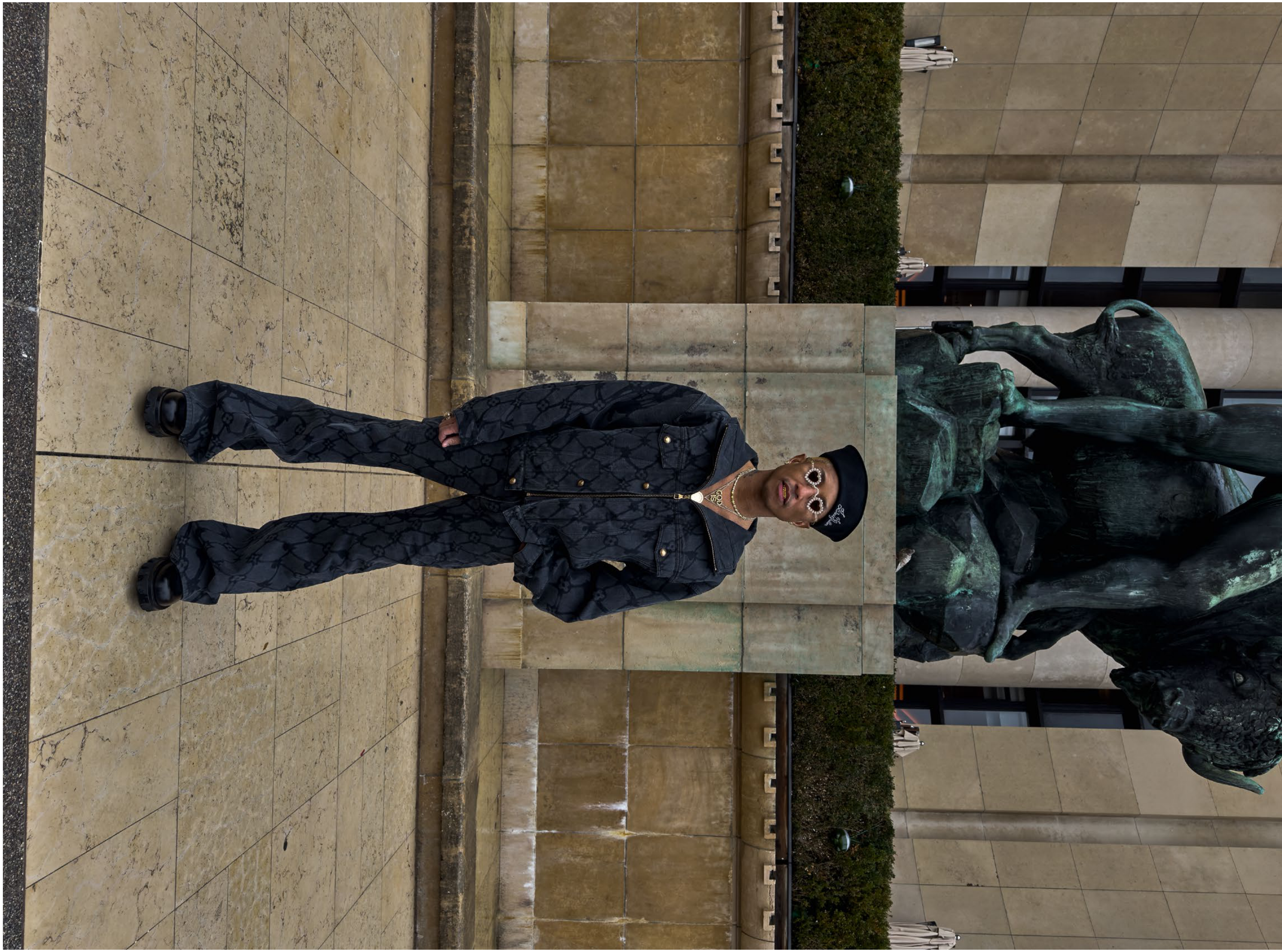
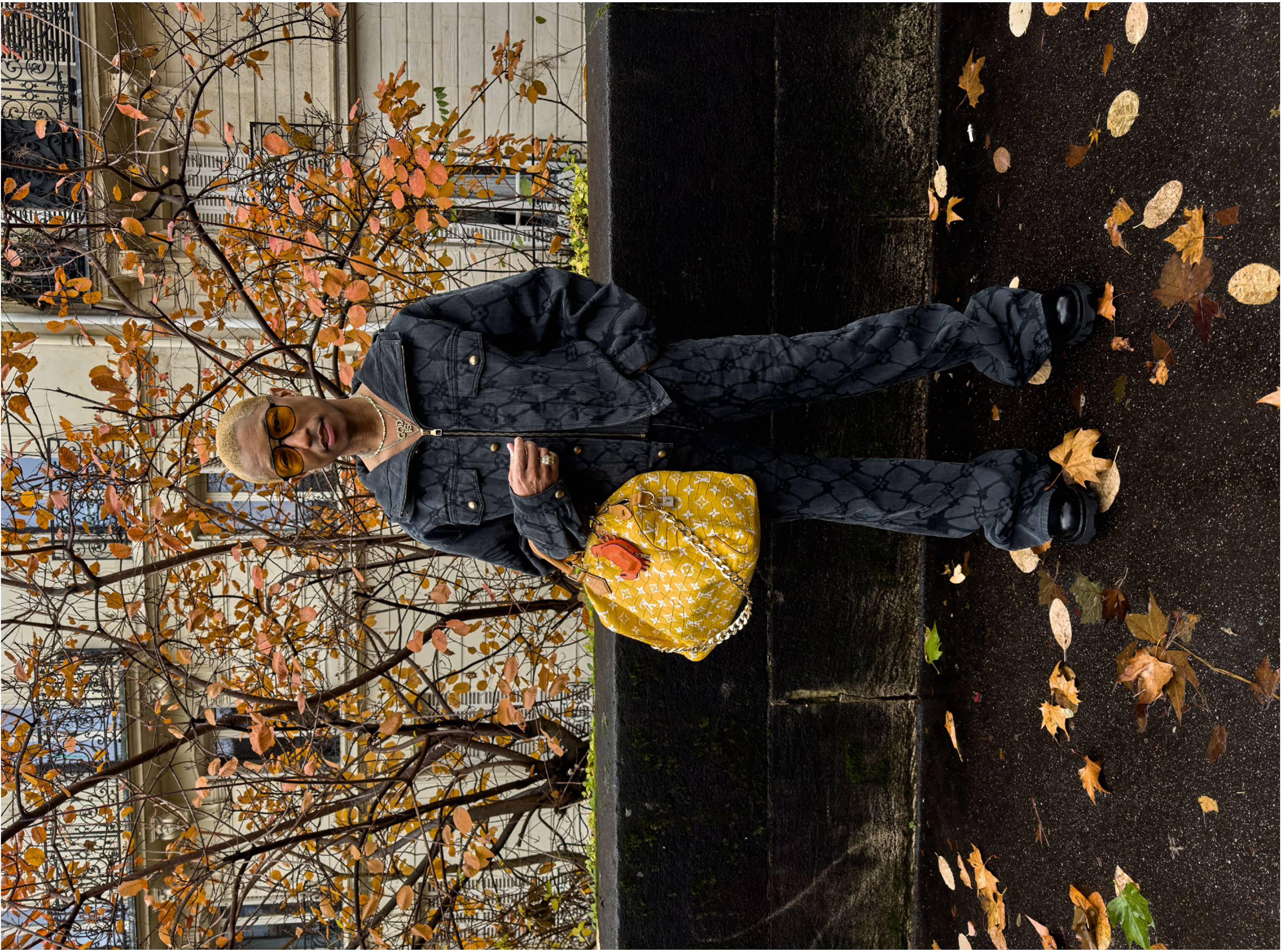
LV surf tailored
double breasted jacket,
sailor flared pants,
and penny loafers.



Monogram fishnet denim
hooded blouson,
flared denim pants,
sailor hat, and derby shoes.



Monogram fishnet
denim hooded blouson,
flared denim pants,
Millionaire Speedy P9
with LV crab keychain,
and derby shoes.

Monogram fishnet denim hooded blouson,
flared denim pants, and derby shoes.

All clothing by Louis Vuitton
Spring/Summer 2024 and Pre-Fall 2024.
Jewellery and sunglasses are Pharrell's own.

First photography assistant: Emma Williams. Post-production by Lucas Rios Palazesi at Quickfix.

# ‘It’s emotional for me to see you here, because you built this house.’

## What happens when Pharrell invites Marc Jacobs back to Louis Vuitton HQ to swap stories…

**Interview by Charlie Porter**

Pharrell and Marc Jacobs at the Louis Vuitton headquarters in Paris, Friday 15 December 2023.

Friday 15 December 2023, a VIP suite at the Louis Vuitton headquarters in Paris, just north of Pont-Neuf. Shortly before 10am, Marc Jacobs walks into the room. It is the first time he has been in the building since 2013, when he left his post as artistic director at Louis Vuitton.

At first, Marc seems apprehensive, nervous. It is understandable, returning to his previous workplace. What we are asking of him today feels monumental. I cannot think of a recent case, in this luxury fashion era, where a former creative or artistic director has gone back to their former label, to speak with a current incumbent on the record. Marc vapes, says he feels cold. He's wearing a double-breasted oversized black Yves Saint Laurent coat designed by Anthony Vaccarello. The previous evening, he was at a dinner hosted by Vaccarello for Juergen Teller's exhibition at the Grand Palais. On his feet are black ballet flats by Balenciaga. At his feet is a Birkin, the large size. He is accompanied by his husband, Char Defrancesco, as well as Nick Newbold, Marc's personal assistant – once described by the *New York Times* as 'the Marc Jacobs whisperer' – and his PR, Michael Ariano. The VIP suite was last decorated to Marc's tastes and hasn't been changed since. For all Louis Vuitton's forward-facing fabulosity, its headquarters remain untouched, an unlovable corporate warren. On the plus side, its unnavigable pokiness has allowed successive design teams the chance to take over a wing, hide away and lock the suits out. The room has been set for *System*'s filmed interview, with a kidney-bean shaped sofa, two microphones ready, one for Marc, one for Pharrell Williams. Three cameras are set up, I'm nestled just to the left of a camera, out of shot, waiting.

Some brief background: in 1997, Marc Jacobs became the first ever artistic director at Louis Vuitton, his role to found ready-to-wear at the house. Before then, Vuitton had never staged a catwalk show, never produced ready-to-wear collections, and had no fashion edge. Marc brought vision, ideas, and, crucially, collaborators. In 2004, Marc worked with Pharrell on Louis Vuitton's first ever pair of sunglasses (Pharrell and Marc each credit the other with first having the idea). By that point, Pharrell had already debuted his label Billionaire Boys Club with his friend Nigo, now the artistic director of Kenzo. At the time, menswear at Louis Vuitton was still mostly catwalk concepts, with little actual product or presence. The sunglasses, named Millionaires, remain big sellers. In 2006, Pharrell and Marc collaborated again for Louis Vuitton, this time on jewellery. It was at that time when Pharrell first met Pietro Beccari, then executive vice-president marketing and communications at Louis Vuitton, and since 2023, CEO. One of Beccari's first actions in the top job was stating he wanted to approach Pharrell for the creative director post at Louis Vuitton menswear, a position that had been vacant since the untimely death of Virgil Abloh in 2021. Pharrell presented his first Louis Vuitton collection in June 2023, a blockbuster staged on Pont-Neuf itself. *System* wanted Pharrell for its Spring 2024 issue cover, and asked Marc if he would be part of the interview. Marc agreed. I'm here to moderate when needs be, to ask questions, and observe.

Pharrell walks in, punctual at 10am. There's hardly anyone with him, just someone from Louis Vuitton. A security guard is stood outside the door. Pharrell is wearing pieces from his first Louis Vuitton collection: a navy crocodile-skin baseball jacket with his insignia for the brand, the word 'Lovers' with an LV logo for the 'L'. On his legs are a pair of lean Louis Vuitton denim flares. In his hand, the faux Louis Vuitton coffee cup from that show, with its own permanently attached straw. The energy switches, and things happen swiftly. Within a minute, Pharrell is down on one knee, head bowed, hands up in prayer in Marc's direction. At first, Marc doesn't see, as he's leaning over to hide his Birkin behind the sofa. Pharrell then gets his attention and he realizes what is happening. Marc relaxes, animates, his guard is down. They start talking straight away, no need for an introduction or instructions on how the interview will pan out, no beginning question from me. Immediately, it's on.

**'When I got my first big cheque from music, the first thing I did was get an LV Keepall. But never in a million years did I think I'd actually meet you.'**

**Pharrell Williams:** This moment is super-surreal.
**Marc Jacobs:** Well, it's surreal to me, too.
**Pharrell:** This guy is the fucking G.O.A.T.
**Marc:** No…
**Pharrell:** The greatest taste, the greatest designer unto yourself, the greatest taste in people that you have, and would like, to collaborate with – just G.O.A.T. level. Like people knew who Murakami is,[1] but man, when you gave him that platform to do what he did, and what you guys did together, that changed his life. That changed his career. It was a magnet for so many of us who were watching the brand: 'OK, Vuitton is a different place because… look at this!' It changed fashion, it changed art, and you just continued to do it over and over again. I can't believe that you gave me a shot, man.
**Marc:** But you can. You can. Just based on what you just said. You believe it.
**Pharrell:** I'm having a hard time believing it. I'm literally pinching myself all the time. From my perspective, it had never happened before. Sure, fashion brands, corporations, they were sending clothes to people in music and sending clothes to some people in rap music specifically, but nobody ever said, 'Come in and let's do something.' You opened the doors for us, and then you held the doors open.

**'Sure, brands sent clothes to rappers, but nobody ever said, 'Come in and do something.' You opened the doors for us, and then you held the doors open.'**

**Marc:** I don't know how to do it any other way. When I arrived in Paris, I was a foreigner. I mean, when you're from New York and you're given a design position at a storied French house, you are about as foreign a foreigner as they get. Typically, the French didn't welcome you with open arms; Parisians didn't welcome you with open arms. I just looked at what went on here creatively in another period of time, when people with different creative visions or voices worked with each other because they were all creative people. You had people like Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli, who were working with really interesting experimental musicians, set designers, artists. I don't think they gave it a second thought. When I looked at the history of good design in Paris, especially in fashion, I was like, 'Well that was the behaviour then, so that's what the behaviour should be now.'
**Pharrell:** Do you think that at a certain point people lost that concept?
**Marc:** I do. There was more ownership, this idea of 'I am the great so-and-so and I own this and I will not share the recognition with others'. What happens when you have a closed mind or when you become too caught up in yourself is that you lose the opportunity to express new things, to meet new people, to share. So I think maybe that's what was happening a little bit in the world of fashion around that time. It was years and years of 'I am the king of this ivory tower and I did everything; it's me, me, me, I, I, I'. There was no 'we' to be found. And when things get 'I' oriented, it's always a dangerous place to be. When you start saying 'we', and let people in, really interesting things happen.
**Pharrell:** That's so true. I like how you refer to it as the 'I' orientation. It's the sickness; it's the ego. I just saw you be so collaborative and I've always prided myself on my collaborations. I feel like my best work was that.
**Marc:** And our story began with sunglasses. Ask and you shall receive. You put it out there, I was receptive. It wasn't premeditated at all. I wasn't searching for people to collaborate with. There's always a reason that makes something feel valid and right. I always need that moment, that spark, that says: this is the right thing to do.
**Pharrell:** You just know [snaps his fingers]. I can't say it's only synonymous with being Aries, but you do have that Aries [snaps his fingers again]. You just know, and you commit.

*The pair have been talking, unprompted, for 9 minutes 40 seconds. Pharrell suddenly turns to me.*

**Pharrell:** Have we domineered this conversation?

**Charlie Porter: No! Honestly, this is the dream.**
**Marc:** Oh, wait a second, this isn't it? Is this it?

**This is it. This is everything I want you to talk about! The dream is also that sometimes the fourth wall is broken as well. Marc, how did you build fashion at Louis Vuitton?**

**Marc:** It was really hard. The beginning was tough. I had a couple of people who worked with me – Camille Miceli [now artistic director of Pucci], Peter Copping, Jane Whitfield – but we were a very small team. We had to start an atelier; there was no Vuitton atelier. All the different LVMH brands operate separately, so it wasn't like, 'Oh, they have a great atelier over at Dior; they're going to help us out'. It was like, no, that's not the way it goes. We had to build it. When Mr Arnault approached me, he wanted to know what my vision of Vuitton in the future could be. I did this project where Vuitton could be a luxurious watch, Vuitton could be jewellery; it could be menswear and womenswear. It was just presenting the possibilities, as I saw it, of what the future would be for Vuitton. Back then, there was no ready-to-wear; there were only bags. And, really, the only convincing bags, in my opinion, were the luggage. When I was asked to do it and came in, we had to make everything else up; there just was no machine here for that. It was very daunting, but it was also fantastic. In the fear of a white page, we found all the things we could do, and it was Pharrell who suggested, 'Oh, it would be great to do Vuitton sunglasses.' I was like, 'Great. Let's do it together.'

**Pharrell:** Let me say two things: number one, it's official, this is the house that you built. [As Pharrell says this, there's a quiet in the room, and Marc softly says, 'Thanks'.] Because it didn't exist before. And we have this in common where we both self-deprecate. It was just nice to really hear you embrace that this was the house that you built, and I will for sure echo those words for the rest of my days. Second of all, the way that it actually happened with the sunglasses is that Emma [Winter, then at Vuitton, who had met Pharrell backstage at a N.E.R.D. gig] had introduced us, and you were like, 'I like those sunglasses, did you make them?' And I was like, 'No, I didn't make them', and you were like, 'Well, do you want to make some?', and I was like, 'Sure, but do you mind if I bring the guy who actually made them, Nigo?' That's how we met; that's exactly what happened.

**Marc:** Yeah, still doesn't seem like that's what happened to me.

**Pharrell:** I promise you.

**Marc:** I believe you. I have a bad memory, so…

**Pharrell:** It's OK! I remember feeling so lucky that you didn't just go, fuck you. And you were still like, yeah, you can bring him.

**Marc:** I remember meeting Nigo with you – that I remember – and I remember some of your vocabulary. There was a phrase you said, 'left of centre'.

**Pharrell:** Yes, sir.

**Marc:** Yes. That stuck in my head forever – that's where you want to be, just left of centre. We talked on the phone at great length about sunglasses, and I remember having a flash, like if it were a movie you'd have this flash of an image, you said 'Sophia Loren's', and I knew exactly what you meant by that style of sunglasses. And fast forward many, many years later, Virgil called me up and says, 'We're going to do these glasses.' And he sent me a pair. [In 2020, Virgil Abloh introduced a new version, called the Louis Vuitton 1.1 Millionaires.]

**Char Defrancesco:** And I stole them…

**Marc:** …and he took them. It's just nice how that life evolved.

**Pharrell:** I met you and we started working together in 2003. Twenty years ago, which is crazy.

**Marc:** It's crazy we got them done so quickly. Then you modelled in the ad campaign shot by Mert and Marcus [for the Autumn/Winter 2006 campaign].

**Pharrell:** Changed my life, man. Do you know that though? Music has been great to me. It continues to be the skeleton key that opens every door. But one of the doors that it opened was meeting you, and having you embrace me in that way and be so supportive, and be so generous. I'm telling you, it only started happening after you did that for me. I just want you to know that on the long list of your accomplishments, your continuous accomplishments in this lifetime, you built this house and you changed my life. One hundred percent.

**Marc:** Thank you. I'm not putting myself down. I had the opportunity of a lifetime being here, being given the freedom and authority to do what I wanted, and what I wanted to do is what I did. Luck is opportunity meets preparation, so I got to do these things and I got to do them with you and Murakami and Stephen Sprouse and a host of people. They were people I respected and looked up to creatively, and all I did was just extend an invitation. You were born with the fashion gene, for sure. Before anybody was rocking certain things, you had that purple croc Birkin…

**Pharrell:** Can I just let them know where I got the inspiration to do the purple croc? You had a green croc; I saw you with it, and I was like, 'Wow…'

**Marc:** You see, you're turning it around again. I said, 'You had this fashion gene', and you're like, 'No, no, no…' It wasn't because of me, it was in you; you had it all along.

**Pharrell:** I'm Mr Observe. I am…

**Marc:** No. What you were doing with music, and how it was expressed through the things you wore, it was uniquely you. It was so seductive and very attractive about you; it was all the creative energy that was manifesting itself. So, you stop the self-deprecating and I'll stop the self-deprecating – and we'll get somewhere maybe.

**'When Mr Arnault approached me, he wanted to know my vision for Vuitton. They only did bags at the time. We had to make everything else up.'**

**Pharrell, I was watching some old N.E.R.D. performances last night on YouTube, and it got me thinking about how punk you were, you know, just in terms of attitude and aesthetic.**

**Pharrell:** Yeah.

**And Marc, you were always part of that punk energy as well…**

**Marc:** Was I?

**I mean, New York punk energy, like with Sonic Youth.[2]**

**Pharrell:** That was a moment when New York was incredibly irreverent. That was the thing to be: subversive. Marc was definitely a part of that class.

**When you came to Paris, you had the audacity to work with Stephen Sprouse.**

**Marc:** Yeah, there were some really great French punks in the art world, too – Duchamp was the ultimate punk-rock artist. That was part of what I thought about when I came here. The guy who puts the moustache on the Mona Lisa is a punk-rock artist through and through. Also what that symbolized, by defacing it or thinking left of centre, you've created something new that speaks to a younger group of people. I thought, 'Wow, you've got the guy here who did all this stuff in the art world, who really shook things up, so there's plenty that's punk rock about Paris.'

**At that time of sunglasses, you had already started Billionaire Boys Club with Nigo, so you were already thinking about garments.**

**Pharrell:** Nigo gave me a shot. I was at a point in my life where I couldn't believe that any of this was happening to me, and that anyone cared enough to share their platform, because he had BAPE that was crushing it.[3] And then meeting Marc… I'll never forget when I made my first cheque in music – it was not a lot of money – but I blew the whole cheque on buying a bunch of Polo. Then when I got my first substantial cheque, the first thing I did was go get the LV roller, the duffle, the Keepall. So I never dreamed in a million years that I was going to meet this guy, and when I met him, I was like, 'OK, he said he wanted to do something'; for me, even if it never came to fruition, the fact that he said that just meant so much. When we did end up doing something, it was like, 'Oh, this is really real.' I'm not really good at reading the moment, to say, 'Oh, this is your time, this is happening.' Someone around me needs to go, 'Hey, do you understand this is really happening?' Because my life wasn't like that up until I got into the music industry. It always just felt like, not necessarily bad luck, but subjugated, gravity pulling down every which way, that's just the way we grew up. But then having BBC and Nigo as a partner, and then bumping into Marc, and then Marc welcoming me in. And then when I asked, 'Can I bring Nigo?' he said yes and I was like, 'Who does that?' Any other vulture or savage in this industry – because there are a lot of them – would have been like [he claps his hands to suggest Nigo was cut out]. But he didn't do that; I've never forgotten that part. That part just there meant so much to me, and I've just been on a continuous high from that notion even up until now. So many of these decisions, he could have said, 'OK, this is our limit; this is where we stop', he was like, 'No, no, no, we did that, do you want to do a campaign?' Wait, what me in the campaign? I wasn't Tyson Beckford[4] or any of these other dudes…

**Marc:** Wait, you're a great looking guy with tons of style, so it was not exactly 'poor you' in that ad campaign.

**Pharrell:** No, no, no, you levelled me up; let's be clear about that. That was a level-up. The fact that you were like, without blinking, 'Do you want to do the campaign?' Wait, what, huh? First of all yes; second of all, wait what? And then we went on to do all the jewellery.

**Marc:** It all just felt like the right thing to do. It wasn't like I thought, I'm going to look back on this or people are going to look back on this; it was just, it's exciting being here and it's exciting trying to figure out, and define, and keep an open mind about the possibilities of what Louis Vuitton could be. Because that was the mindset, and because you were you, and the time was what it was, it worked beautifully.

**Do you mean that in the wider sense of the possibility of being generous, in collaboration or in work, rather than being vulture?**

**Marc:** The vulture thing comes further along in history. People look back, and they want the results of that which they can see now, but weren't open to then.

**Pharrell:** Yes, that's true.

**Marc:** If I can pat myself on the back, maybe that's part of what was special. I was in a position of power here with an open mind. That's what I saw as right and interesting and cool, as opposed to a vulture later looking back and saying, 'How can I use that?'

**'I had to do the same thing you [Marc] did, and present my vision to Mr Arnault – the future of chic, which I think is dandy. He liked it.'**

**I'm struck by how your stories often hinge on individual conversations – that these things with huge cultural impact happen because one person just calls someone else.**

**Pharrell:** You can't premeditate it. Some of these things you can plan, but oftentimes, the most magical things are those you didn't. It's just the instinct to ask the right question at the right time, or being around the right kind of really receptive person or a perfect environmental context so you can look at each other and go, 'Oh yeah, we're crazy if we don't do this right now.' Marc just has that instinct [clicks his fingers] that he knows he should ask this question or make this suggestion, and we're all idiots not to step up. It's just natural. It's no different than a Tuesday coming after a Monday, right before Wednesday.

> **'When you're from New York and you're given a design position at a storied French house, you are about as foreign a foreigner as they get.'**

**Can we jump to now? How were you asked if you wanted to be creative director of menswear at Louis Vuitton?**

**Pharrell:** I'd been talking to Alexandre Arnault for a year,[5] and I always thought Nigo would be the guy. I wear Kenzo all the time [Pharrell opens his jacket to show he's wearing a Kenzo sweatshirt], and then Pietro got the position [as CEO of Vuitton] and had me in mind. I didn't know this, until Alex called me and was like, 'It's time', and in my brain I was like, 'Yes, Nigo's going to get the house; this is going to be amazing.' And he's like, 'Yeah, you know, Pietro just can't think of anybody else better suited for the position than you.' And I was like, '*What*?' He's like, 'Yeah, you. I hope you'll accept.' I was like, 'I fucking accept, but I'm going to need some time to think about it.' He was like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, we hope you accept'; I was like, 'No, no, no, you don't understand – I said yes already. I just need some time to go unpack this, because I didn't see this coming.' I've been feeling the same way ever since. You have to understand, it's a bit emotional for me to see you because you started this. You built this house, and you knocked down the first domino that got me to this place, and I never saw this. You know, sunglasses, campaign, jewellery – in my mind, that was enough, flag in the ground. When Virgil got the position, I was like, 'Oh, this is amazing, this story just keeps evolving, look what Marc did! I'm good! I'm over at Chanel. I've been there for nine years.' [6]

**Marc:** Which was amazing; that was really good output there.

**Pharrell:** I didn't renew over at Chanel. I don't know why, something in me was just like, 'Don't renew, just chill, be supportive, you love them, they've been good to you. Virginie [Viard, creative director of Chanel] is awesome, Karl's gone, you're cool, just chill.' When I got that call [from Alexandre Arnault], I couldn't believe it. I literally spent the rest of the year, because it was towards the end of the year… you know those moments where somebody tells you something, you're just not even aware of how you're looking any more, because you're just staring into the distance, you're just ruminating, and I was like, 'Is this real? Am I going to mess this up? Is something going to happen?'

**How quickly did your life change, when did you start coming to live here? What did your life look like after that call?**

**Pharrell:** I haven't really been home since. We came here in January. I had to do the same thing you [Marc] did, and present my vision to Mr Arnault – the future of chic, which I think is dandy. He liked it, and pretty much everything you saw in the collection and the first show is what we presented then. I love it here; my whole mindset has shifted. With this appointment, seeing what is possible has been given a new definition and new context; it's afforded me this different POV of Paris. I hang out with my kids, my family, but I work. And I've always worked hard, but I probably work harder than I ever have in my life.

**Can you unpack this word chic, and the role that both of you have played in the evolution of what men wear?**

**Pharrell:** Well, I would say, if Marc didn't start it, he was definitely one of the founding fathers of that blend, on a popular level. I started wearing Chanel pieces I thought I could pull off. Not because they were more masculine, but because I thought the silhouette just lent itself to looking good on a human. So, I wore pearls or a sweater that made sense, but then I started to see how Marc would wear things at that time. It's interesting, because when we first met, I felt like you wore a lot of button-downs, but very casually, with jeans or khakis; you had these clear glasses frames.

**Marc:** Oh, yeah.

**Pharrell:** Very casual, always a cigarette, just super cool, colourful socks, and you'd wear these worn Stan Smiths.

**Marc:** Yeah.

**Pharrell:** That's the reason I started wearing Stan Smiths because I saw how you were wearing yours. Yours weren't new; they were worn. Then you would have the Hermès; I didn't know what to do with myself. This guy's got all the sauce, that just started to inform me. It was like, 'OK, well who am I now? What do I get to do? Because this guy is getting to do whatever he wants, there are no rules.' That really informed me.

**You mean the individuality of dressing?**

**Pharrell:** And not having any rules. That's why it's like blowing my mind, because he's still knocking down the walls of what one can do and showing people how they can do it.

**Marc:** I love fashion. That's why I do this, right? This is the main reason why I'm interested in working in this world: I love fashion. Part of what I love about fashion is the change. I have a very personal relationship to that change, so if it's something like a ballerina flat that takes me away, then that's what my life looks like for the next however many months. I do remember seeing you at a certain point and I think the shorts may have been Comme des Garçons and there was a Vivienne hat, and I just took note of the different things. The big picture was that there was still that passion, because if there wasn't that passion, there wouldn't be a new hat to note, there wouldn't be a new pair of shorts to note, there wouldn't be a new shoe to note.

**Pharrell:** And, by the way, when I get obsessed, I need it in *every* colour.

> **'Maybe by speaking to each other, and sharing our stories and our relationship, it'll open up the possibility for more of this to happen elsewhere.'**

**Marc:** Of course. It's really interesting you asked about this idea of chic. I don't know if chic is part of the current vocabulary, as a word. You know what I mean? It almost belongs to another time, I don't hear a lot of young people using that word, but what it represents never goes away. What's so interesting is people's relationship to fashion, it's so cool now. You can say pearls, you can say a Birkin, it's not a lady's necklace, it's not a woman's handbag, it's just pearls, it's just a bag. That is like, 'Woah, that is futuristic!' Who would have thought we'd have to attach a gendered article in front of these things; they're just materials to create a look.

**Pharrell, how has it been to put the shows together?**

**Pharrell:** I've never been nervous about the shows. I think it's because I'm so obsessed with the details, I'm too carried away with making sure everything's OK that I don't have the bandwidth to actually worry.

**Marc:** One of the most beautiful things about working here in Paris was that we would talk about some button design, and then the people who work in the atelier would bring the prototype of the button on a velvet cushion. They were so proud of executing this idea you've given them the privilege to do.

**Pharrell:** Yeah, you totally feel like a kid in that moment. You know what? You're probably the first person who I've ever been able to share that feeling with in a conversation. [The people at Vuitton] are like, 'Look, this is what you asked for [he acts out someone showing him their detailed work], and, by the way, we thought, why don't we just add this bit too?' And you're like [he acts amazed and impressed], '*What*?!'

**Straight off, you're continuing this spirit of collaboration at Louis Vuitton, with the artist Henry Taylor in your debut collection.**

**Pharrell:** As a black man on this planet, I'm supposed to do that. The door was held open for me, so I had to do that. I have a responsibility. My job is to hold the door. Anyone watch *Game of Thrones*? Hodor. That's my job.

*I've watched* Game of Thrones *and know what he means by Hodor, but no one else in the room responds. Pharrell is stunned and spends some time trying to convince Marc and Char to try again – he suggests they watch with subtitles. Pharrell says he's watched* Game of Thrones *four times already, and his favourite character is Bran Stark. To avoid spoilers, I won't say why. But by now the pair have been talking for over an hour; it's time to wind up.*

**I was just going to say how incredible it's been to be witness to this conversation, and how meaningful and how rare it is, in this luxury fashion house era, to have two creative directors in the same room from different periods. I don't think it ever happens…**

**Marc:** Hopefully, it'll happen more in the future. Hopefully, humankind will change, and realize that love, respect, mutual admiration, appreciation, are the way forward, and not be, 'It's mine, I made it, I'm better than you are'. Maybe by speaking to each other, and sharing our stories, our relationship, maybe it'll open up the possibility for more of this elsewhere, right? What do you think?

**Pharrell:** I couldn't agree more.

**Thank you, for opening up so much.**

**Pharrell:** Well, you know, the two of us have a lot of mutual respect.

**Marc:** We also have a genuine relationship. It's authentic. You get what you came for.

**Pharrell:** I will always be grateful to this guy. You know where we are right now? You know who I'm talking to? You know what's happening? My greatest job is not waking up, because this is a dream. That's the only hard part of the job I've got – don't wake up.

Video stills: Ambre Fraisse, Jérémie Levy, Lou Respinger.

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1. Takashi Murakami is a Japanese artist with whom Marc Jacobs first collaborated for the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2003 collection; he is also a close friend of Pharrell and the pair have often collaborated.

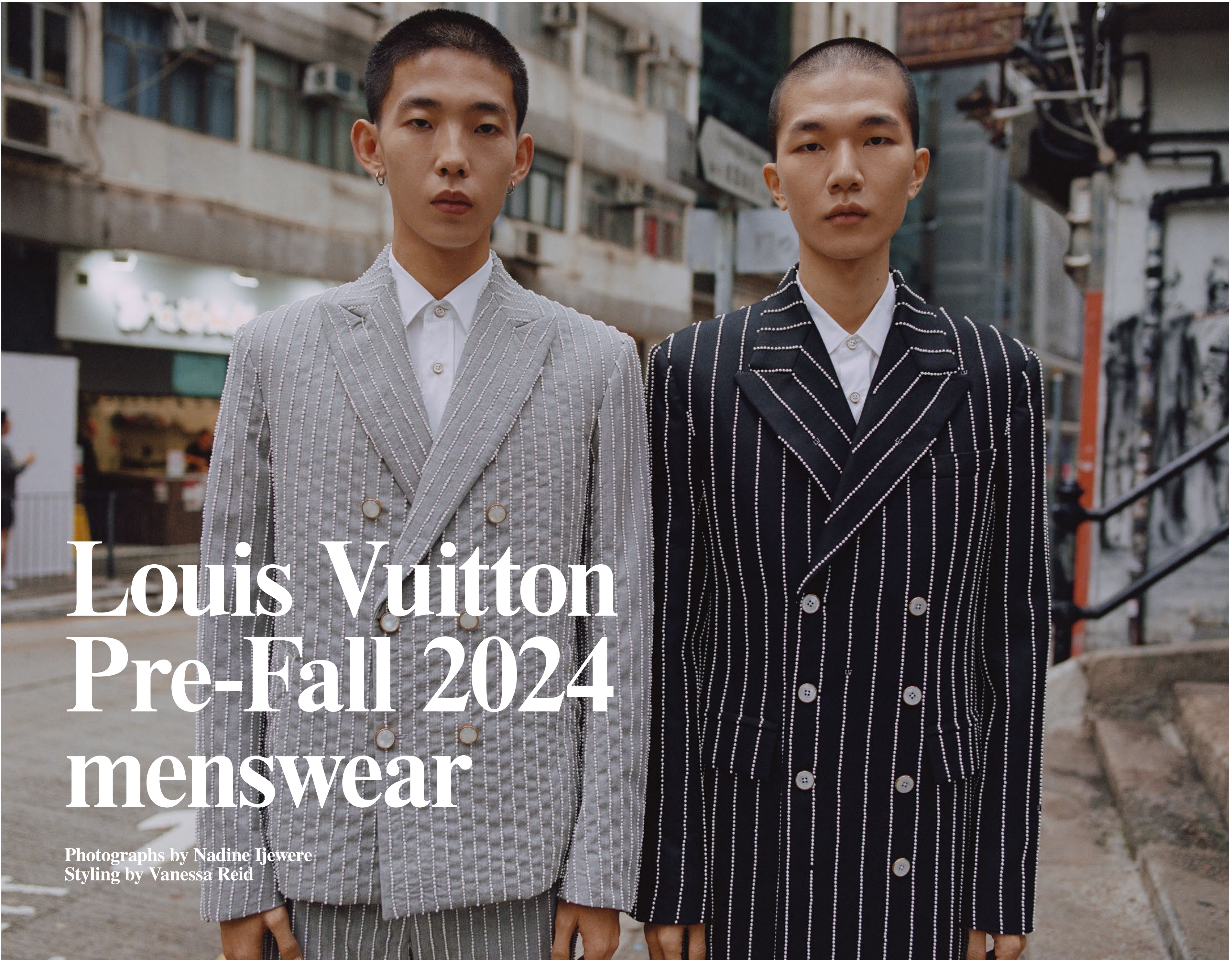
2. The video for Sonic Youth's 'Sugar Kane' featured the (in)famous 'grunge' collection that Marc Jacobs designed for Perry Ellis in 1992. The song was taken from the band's 1992 album *Dirty* and released as a single in 1993.

3. Nigo created his streetwear label A Bathing Ape or BAPE in Tokyo in 1993.

4. Tyson Beckford is a model and media personality. Considered one of the original male supermodels, he was particularly associated with Ralph Lauren shows and advertising campaigns in the early 1990s. He was chosen as *GQ*'s 'Man of the Year' in 1995 and appeared – shirtless, on a motorbike – in the video for Britney Spears' 2003 single 'Toxic'.

5. Alexandre Arnault is one of LVMH chairman and CEO Bernard Arnault's four sons, and himself an executive at LVMH-owned Tiffany & Co. Before Pharrell's appointment as menswear designer at Louis Vuitton, he and Alexandre Arnault had long discussed the options of who could follow Virgil Abloh at the house.

6. Pharrell became a brand ambassador for Chanel in 2014; the professional collaboration included a capsule collection in 2019.



# Louis Vuitton Pre-Fall 2024 menswear

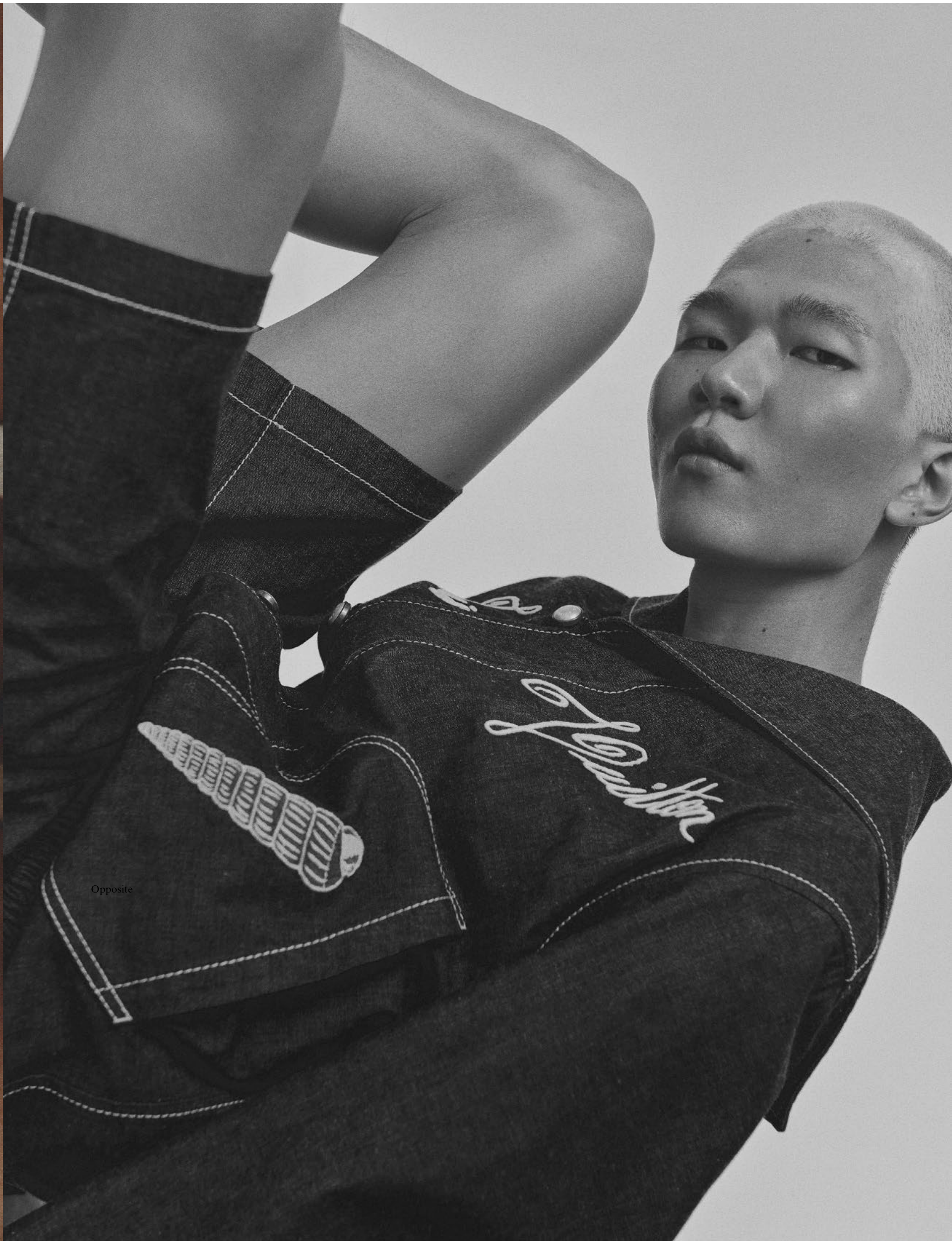
**Photographs by Nadine Ijewere**
**Styling by Vanessa Reid**

Yang (left) wears grey wool suit with pearl pinstripe embroidery and white cotton button down. Tu (right) wears black wool jacket with pearl pinstripe embroidery, and white cotton shirt.

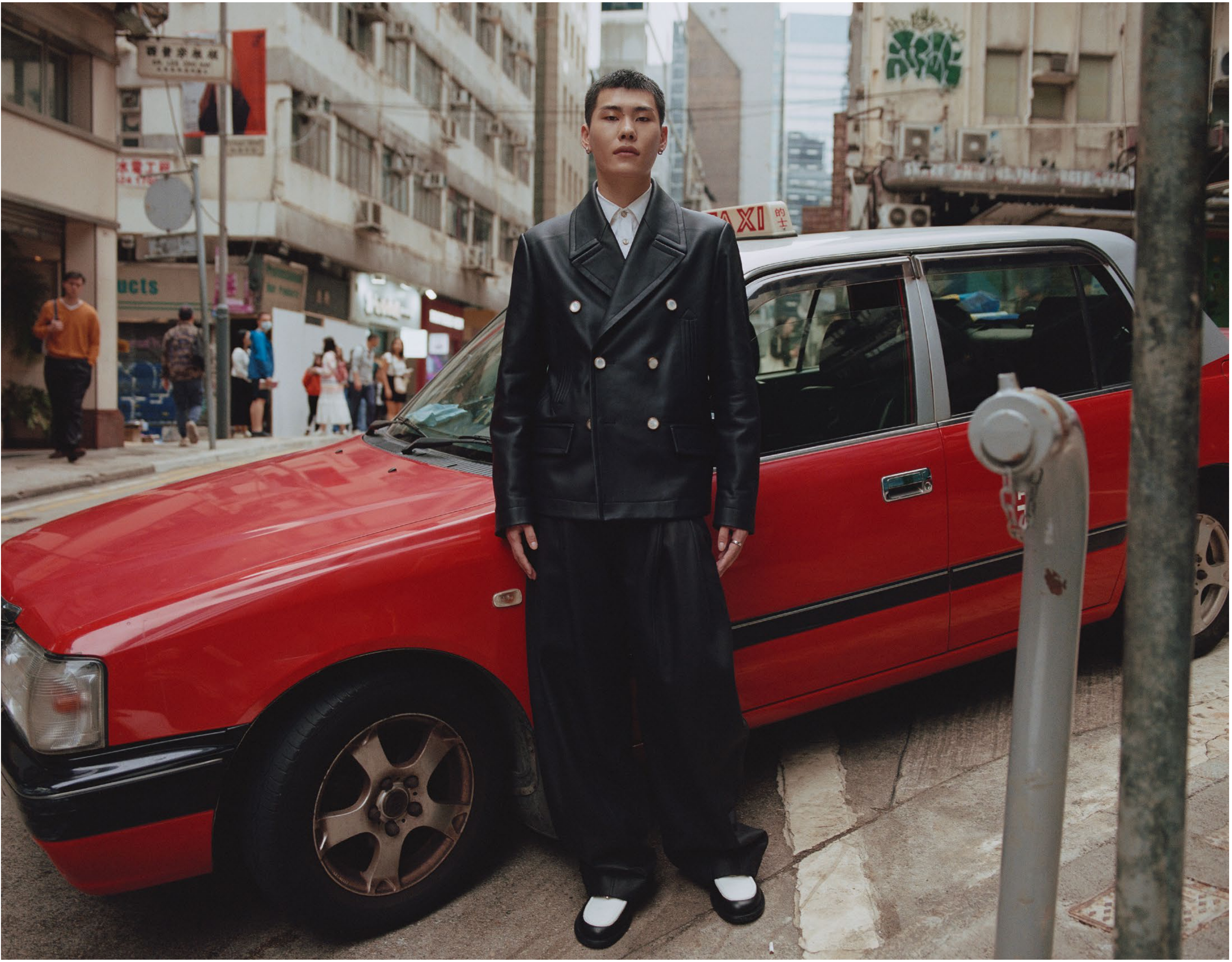
LOUIS VUITTON
SINCE 1854
2 rue du Pont Neuf
Size 49 mm

Zihung and Yang both wear logo sunglasses.

Opposite page: Tu wears indigo denim sailor jacket with logo embroidery, and indigo denim shorts.



Opposite



Zhijun wears black leather blazer,
pleated trousers, and black
and white leather penny loafers.

Rachel wears wool suit jacket, pleated wool shorts, and black leather knee high boots.

Cheng wears cream silk embroidered suit, white cotton button down, and black leather sandals.

Opposite page: Yang (left) wears grey wool suit with pearl pinstripe embroidery, and a white cotton button down. Tu (right) wears black wool jacket with pearl pinstripe embroidery, and a white cotton shirt.

Tu (left) wears white cotton tank top. Yang (right) wears black cotton tank top model's own.

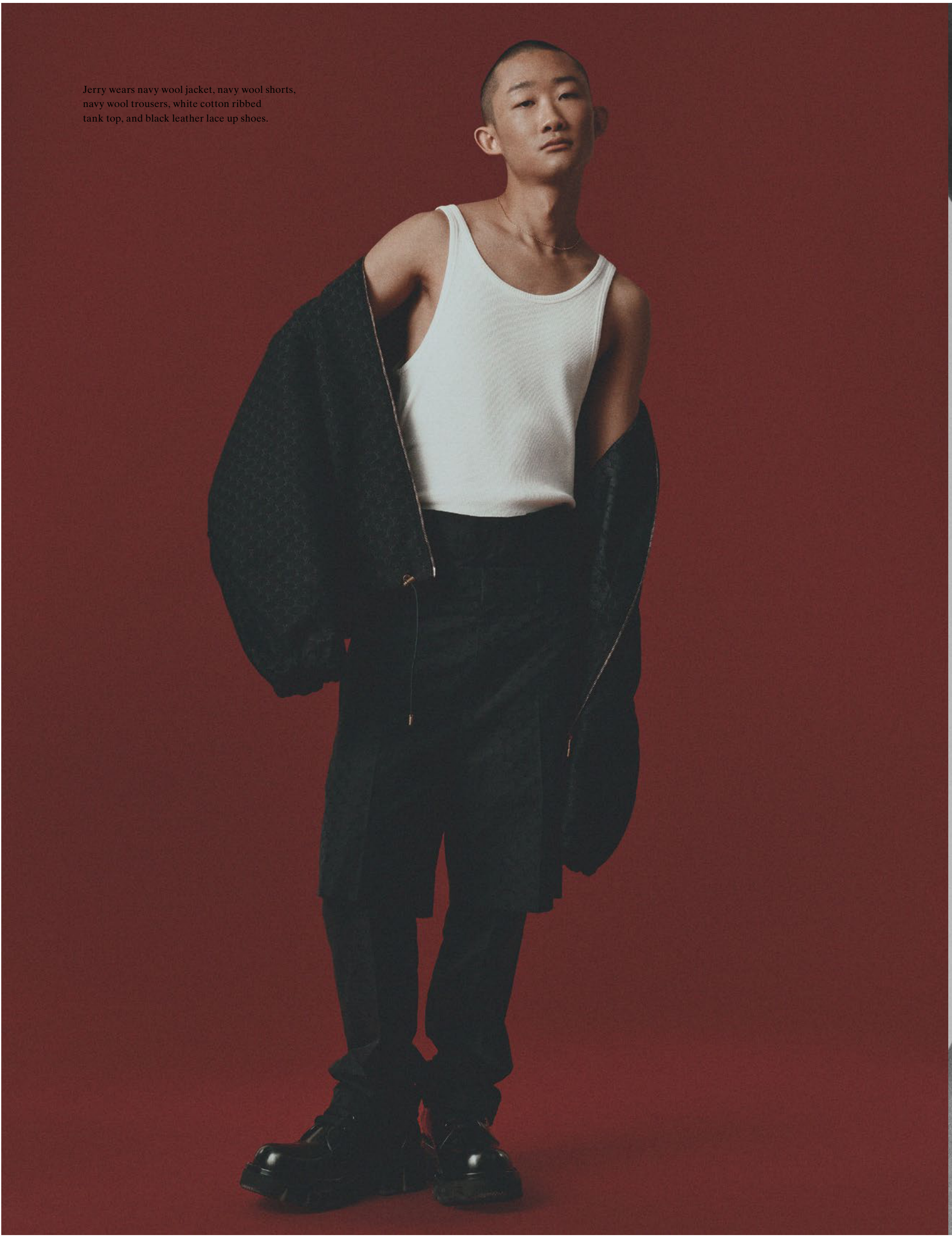
Cheng wears black wool jacket with pearl pinstripe embroidery, white cotton button down, white silk tie, and black and white leather penny loafers.

Opposite page: Rachel wears black denim double breasted suit, white cotton button down, and black silk tie.

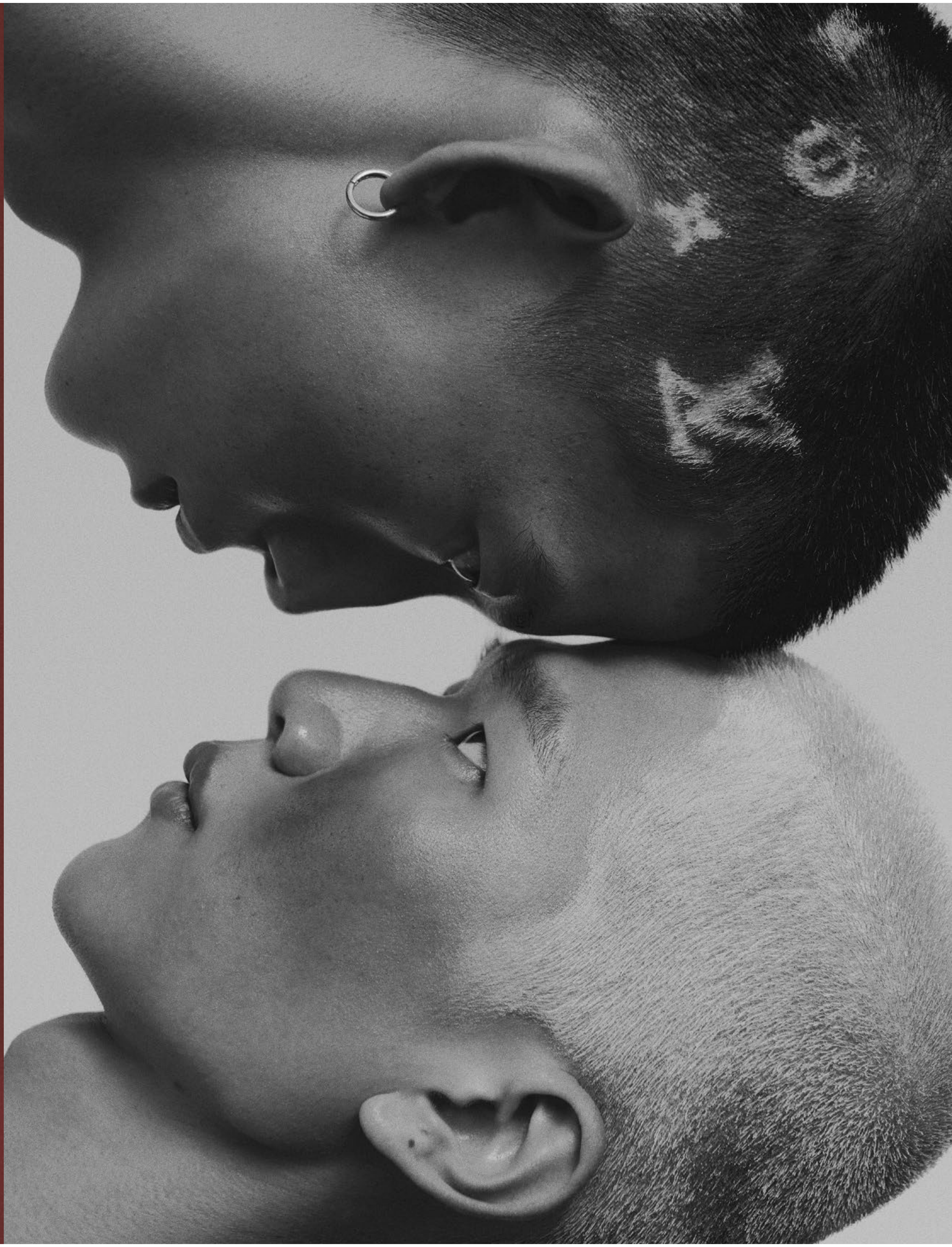
Zhang wears cream wool and silk suit
and white cotton ribbed tank top.

Cheng holds yellow leather Damier Leather Alma bag and wears black leather knee high boots.

Opposite page: Yang (left) wears navy and blue knit monogram t-shirt. Zhijun (middle) wears short sleeve monogram sweater. Tu (right) wears knit bomber jacket.

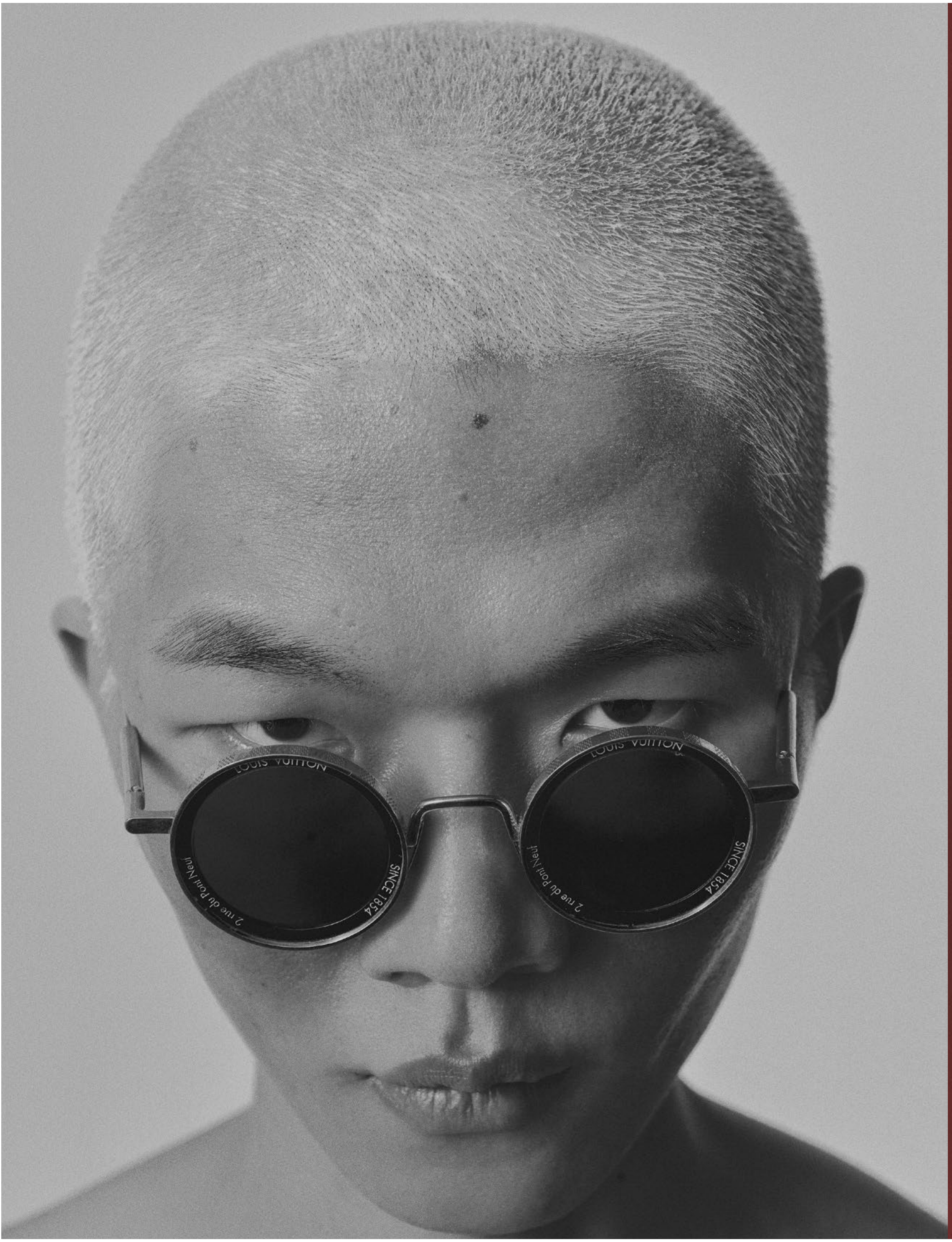


Jerry wears navy wool jacket, navy wool shorts, navy wool trousers, white cotton ribbed tank top, and black leather lace up shoes.



Zhijun wears black leather blazer
and white cotton button down.

Opposite page: Yang wears navy cotton
jacket, beige cotton pleated trousers,
white cotton button down, and
black leather penny loafers.


LOUIS VUITTON
SINCE 1854
2 rue du Pont Neuf
LOUIS VUITTON
SINCE 1854
2 rue du Pont Neuf

Zhang wears cream silk and wool blend suit and black leather flats.

Opposite page: Tu wears round metal logo sunglasses.

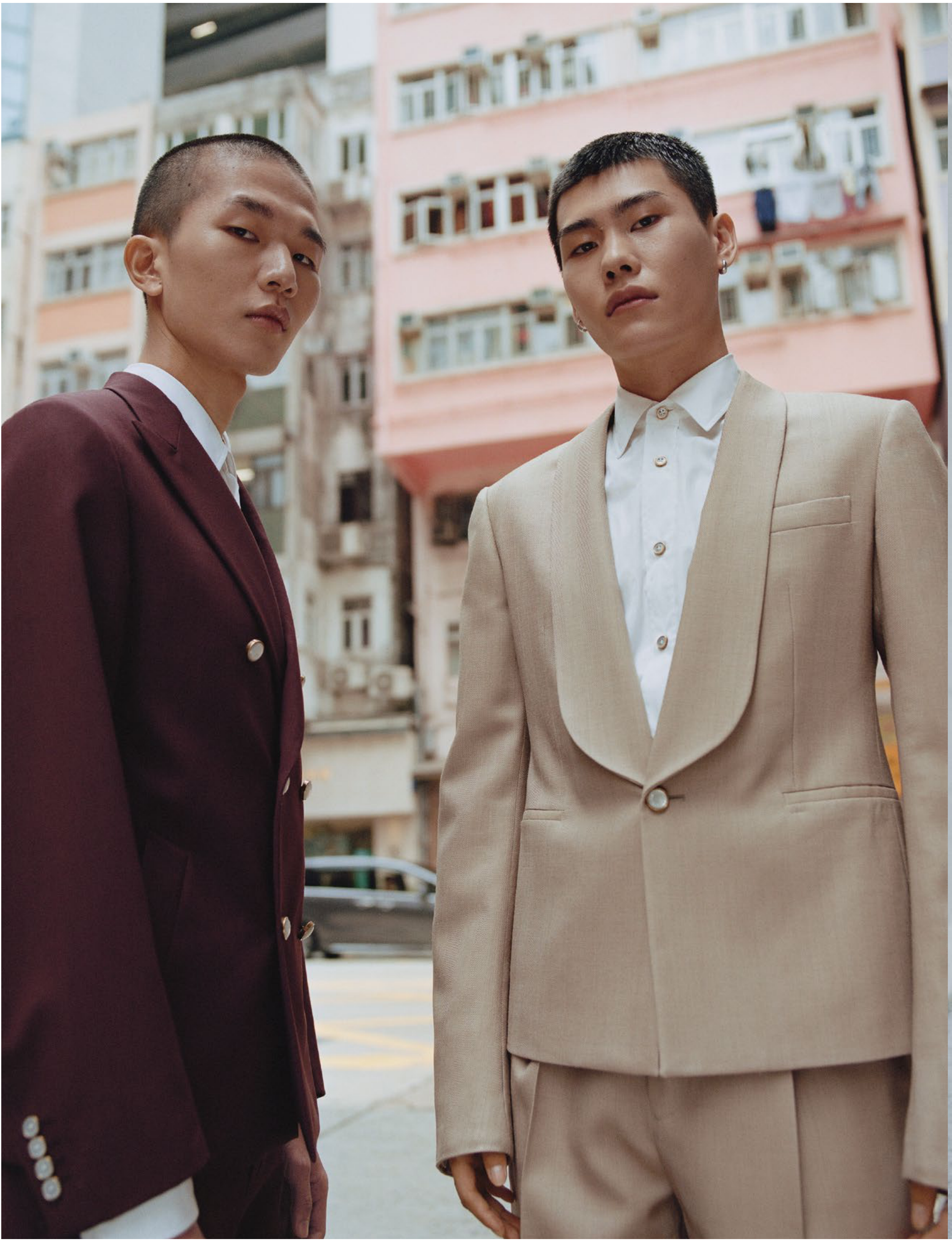
Louis Vuitton Malletier
Depuis 1854

Cheng holds Damier check blue jeans and denim bag.

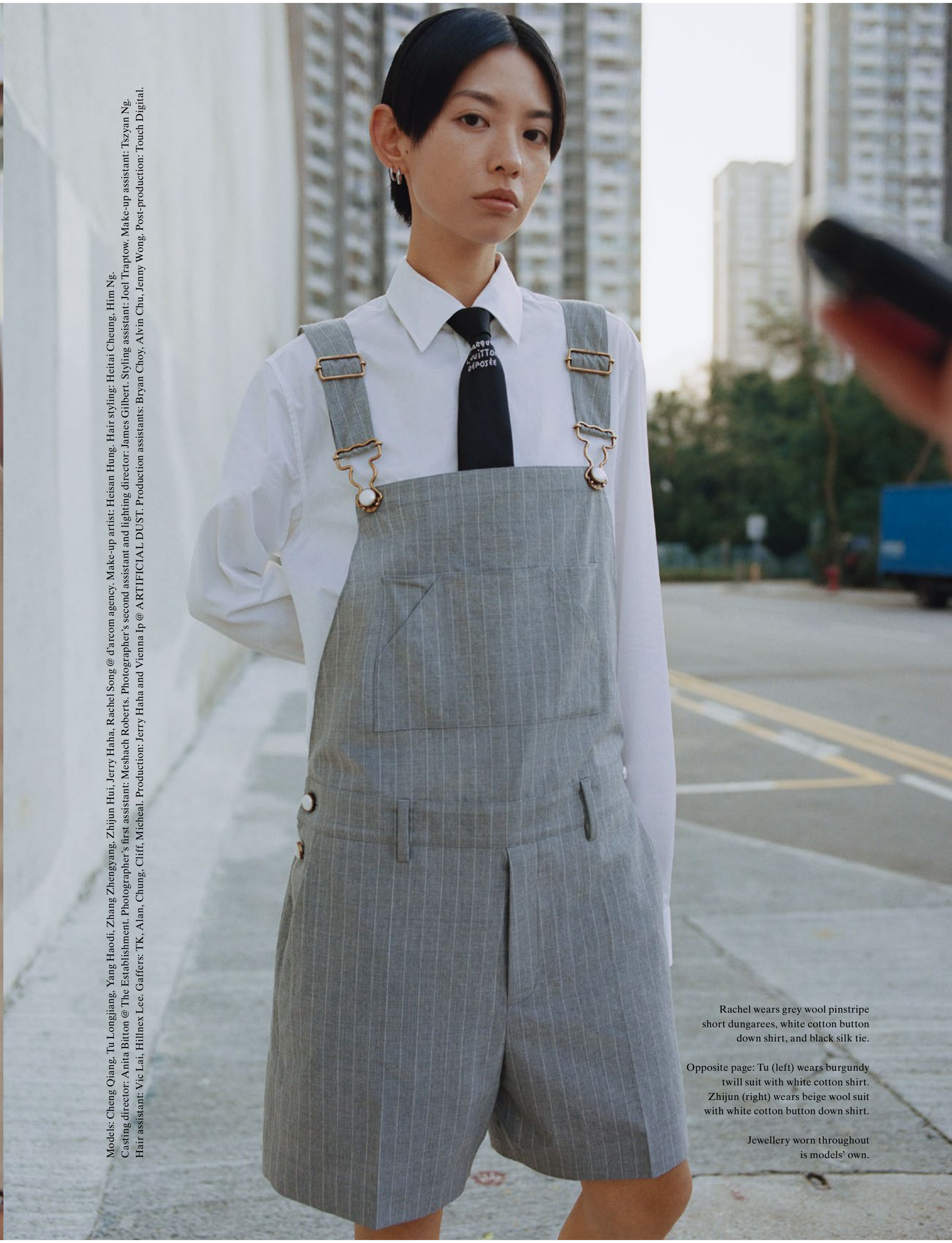
Opposite page:
Zhang wears denim embroidered sailor shirt, navy nylon track jacket, textured denim shorts worn over matching nylon track pants.

Rachel wears washed black denim suit, white
cotton button down, and black leather penny loafers.

Opposite page: Tu (left) wears burgundy twill suit,
Yang (middle) wears navy cotton jacket and white
button down, Zhijun (right) wears beige wool suit.



Models: Cheng Qiang, Tu Longjiang, Yang Haodi, Zhang Zhengyang, Zhijun Hui, Jerry Haha, Rachel Song @ d'arcom agency. Make-up artist: Heisan Hung. Hair styling: Heitai Cheung, Him Ng. Casting director: Anita Bitton @ The Establishment. Photographer's first assistant: Meshach Roberts. Photographer's second assistant and lighting director: James Gilbert. Styling assistant: Joel Traptow. Make-up assistant: Tszyan Ng. Hair assistant: Vic Lai, Hillnex Lee. Gaffers: TK, Alan, Chung, Cliff, Micheal. Production: Jerry Haha and Vienna Ip @ ARTIFICIAL DUST. Production assistants: Bryan Choy, Alvin Chu, Jenny Wong. Post-production: Touch Digital.



Rachel wears grey wool pinstripe short dungarees, white cotton button down shirt, and black silk tie.

Opposite page: Tu (left) wears burgundy twill suit with white cotton shirt. Zhijun (right) wears beige wool suit with white cotton button down shirt.

Jewellery worn throughout is models' own.

# Change and change again

## For one writer the best way to stay in fashion was to get out. By Charlie Porter. Photograph by Guillaume Blondiau.

'Get out.' That's what I remember thinking in my first season in Milan, on my first job as a fashion editor; a role I had wanted for so long. It was February 2001, four months after I'd become deputy fashion editor of the *Guardian*. I loved the job and what fashion writing had opened up for me. If you write about clothes, I had discovered, you can use it to write about pretty much anything you want.

I was 27. Back then, before WiFi and 5G, Milan felt remote to visiting editors and emotions ran high. At a dinner, an editor from another title behaved monstrously; there was violence, and I think the police were called. I remember thinking, 'Get out before that happens to you.' Do not become a monster. So I set a target for early mid-life. I switched and changed often. I quit the *Guardian* in 2004, as I'd done all I could as a deputy. And I took the job of associate editor at British *GQ*, which was fun until it wasn't. I remember the first time I heard the word 'YouTube', and seeing iPhones arrive in 2007. Condé Nast had been such a place of certainty, but then there was a subtle shift: it felt like we were propping it up. I got out.

That was 2008. I morphed a couple more times and in 2013 took a freelance role as men's fashion critic of the *Financial Times*. It was wild; I had total freedom. I could write in depth about new names whose work sparked me: Craig Green, Wales Bonner. I could say what needed saying about luxury conglomerate brands and their output. I tracked seismic change in the fashion industry: how casual (sneakers, hoodies, tracksuits) became accepted as the norm; how social media changed utterly how garments were seen and consumed. And then I turned 45. I'd gotten too used to the work. A brand could show me anything on the catwalk and I could write a review in 87 minutes. Meanwhile, the day-to-day of a critic was debilitating. I was getting sick at the end of most seasons, and it wasn't going to get any easier. It was 2018 and I'd reached my mid-life break point. I got out.

I embrace change. That might seem natural for fashion, which should involve the challenging newness of ideas and a forward outlook. But the luxury fashion industry seeks profit from keeping things the same, using the deadening words of brand-building: 'timeless', 'iconic', 'legacy'. For many brands, mega-budget runway shows are a surface sheen of brainless novelty, masking businesses that, really, just want to sell the same stuff over and over and over. This is no revelation – it's the obvious business model for a conglomerate brand – but it can seem like the only story in town. Young designers can feel pressured to act in their ninth month like they're thinking about their 150th anniversary. Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's period of extraordinary change in the 1970s is unparalleled, with their World's End boutique switching identity and output from Let It Rock to Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die to SEX to Seditionaries.

If only we encouraged such change. To me, the most important fashion movement in London for the past few years has been Fantastic Toiles, a pop-up run by Nasir Mazhar, providing a platform for independent designers making one-off pieces, like Jawara Alleyne, Pig Ignorant and Seeing Red. Its venue is always changing; its stock is always different. Mazhar was a London catwalk designer in the 2010s, then quit it all, uninterested in that treadmill. Because what else are you going to do? Take a job as creative and artistic director, and you get to talk about timelessness and legacy for three or four years before getting kicked out. If you are removed before you remove yourself, the psychological effects are damaging. When the verdict comes out on the fashion industry and mental health, I do not think the outcome will be pretty.

I'm now 50. I love fashion, and I engage with it on my own terms. In the past four years, I've written two books on our relationship with clothing: *What Artists Wear* and *Bring No Clothes: Bloomsbury and the Philosophy of Fashion*. At the end of the latter, I suggest a new philosophy of fashion, one that aims for understanding and agency, rather than exploitation and emptiness. I would never have gotten to this point if I hadn't changed and changed again. That front row seat to which you so desperately cling? It's not your birthright. The fashion industry is a business and it will spit you out. Wake up, stay nimble, retain your voice, nurture it, take control, and get out – it's the only way.

# Keeping it unreal

**How a bootleg hoodie landed one Marc Jacobs fan the job of a lifetime. By Ava Nirui. Photograph by Guillaume Blondiau.**

In 2015, I was making fake designer sweatshirt one-offs from Champion blanks by co-opting their trademark C insignia on the chest into luxury brand logos. I had just finished one that ripped off the Marc Jacobs logo and decided to post it on my Instagram. Shortly after, I received a message from someone who worked at Marc Jacobs in New York. As I quickly scanned the message – anticipating the words 'cease and desist' – I was shocked to learn that the guy was interested in buying the sweatshirt to gift to Marc. I read the message several times, convinced I was missing something. At the time, several friends were embroiled in messy legal battles with big luxury fashion houses over bootlegs they created. I just assumed it was my turn at bat. And as much as I was relieved, I was left very confused over the thought that Marc would want this janky DIY counterfeit.

Lo and behold, a few months later, I was asked by two women who ran the social at Marc Jacobs if I would consider working on a collaboration with the brand. I was surprised by how open they were to new ideas, particularly those around the concept of somehow defacing the Marc Jacobs logo. Their interest in a genuine collaboration was an early reflection of the culture inside the company.

It is all still very surreal for me – to have been contacted by a brand run by their namesake designer whom I have looked up to since I was a teenager. And while I had some experience with junior to mid-level fashion jobs since moving to New York from Australia, I was never able to contribute to a brand with such creative freedom. I was invited back to do a second collaboration, which in hindsight was really the mini-incubator for what would become the Heaven by Marc Jacobs project. I asked Julian [Consuegra] from Stray Rats, Avi [Gold] from Better Gift Shop and David [Owen] and Angela [Hill] from IDEA Books to create some artwork for a series of limited-edition hoodies. I remember thinking back then, 'I wonder if I could figure out a way to do this full-time at Marc.'

A few months after the second project was released, I was contacted by Nick Newbold who works closely alongside Marc, and wouldn't you know, a day or two later I was standing awestruck in (more or less) the same studio space as I had seen in Loïc Prigent's Louis Vuitton documentary. It took a few minutes to find my footing in the meeting with Marc as I stumbled a bit before settling and remembering to breathe! I don't recall ever feeling so nervous in my entire life. I remember feeling so humbled by his kindness, intelligence and incredible ability to articulate himself. He shared a series of upcoming projects with me and showed me stacks of unreleased ready-to-wear campaign printouts before walking me through where the business was and its intended direction. He spoke candidly about his instincts in wanting to meet with me to discuss the possibility of working full-time at the company. I remember Marc telling me that my first project for his brand (crudely rewriting and misspelling the Marc Jacobs logo for a hoodie), reminded him of the spirit of his collaboration with Stephen Sprouse for Louis Vuitton and the inherent nature of taking risks and trusting instincts.

After the meeting, I connected again with Nick who literally asked me to write a dream job description while taking into consideration the brand's history, its current position in the marketplace, and where I saw potential to create a new and exciting expression. A few months later, I joined Marc Jacobs full time as 'Head of Special Projects', which was the beginning of what has now been five incredible years.

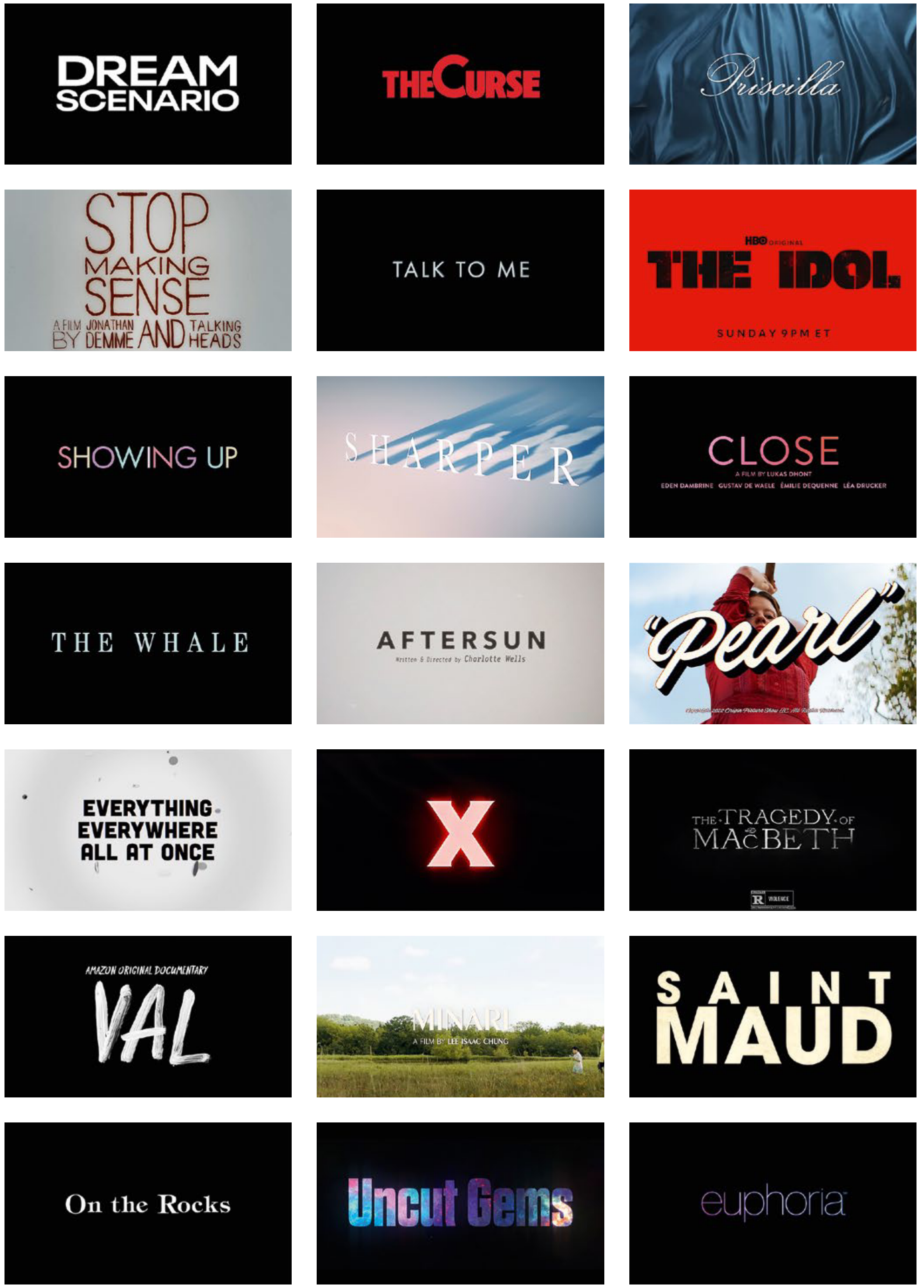
The irony in all of this, as I see it, begins and ends with the idea of taking risks and trusting instincts. When I made that Marc Jacobs/Champion hoodie, I wasn't thinking of potential repercussions and if I had, I probably would have stopped short of posting to Instagram. I like to think I continue to apply a 'risk-vs-reward' approach to the work I am doing these days for the brand and remind myself daily of something that Marc has repeated over the years: 'Know the rules before you break them, and ask for forgiveness later.'

Within both the Marc Jacobs and Heaven lines, we continue to invite many people from niche pockets of the internet to come and play. Their fresh creative perspectives are so incredibly valuable and inspiring to us all. I like to think the spirit of inviting others to interpret, collaborate and dream a little with the brand is the privilege that Marc extended to me. Heaven would not exist without the hundreds of contributors who are helping to architect and shape the line and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Marc inviting me in to dream a little…

# ‘It’s basically perceived as a ‘fashionable’ brand.’

## How A24 adopted fashion’s love of branding to transform itself from a film distributor into a social-media-savvy cultural phenomenon.

By Sara McAlpine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A FILM BY LUKAS DHONT
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THE WHALE
AFTERSUN
Written & Directed by Charlotte Wells
Pearl
EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE
X
THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH
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AMAZON ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY
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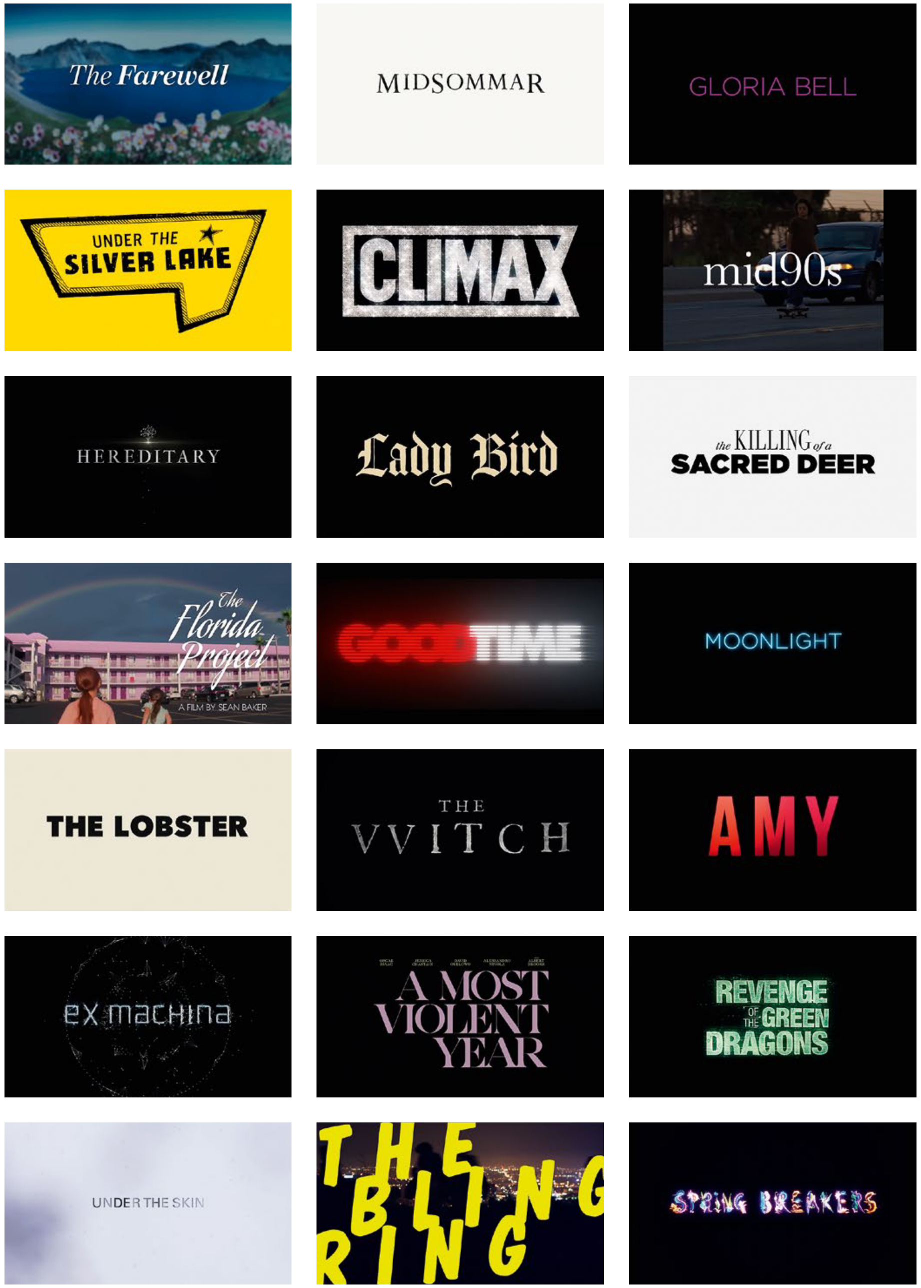
MINARI
A FILM BY LEE ISAAC CHUNG
SAINT MAUD
On the Rocks
Uncut Gems
euphoria

Courtesy of A24 Films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GLORIA BELL
UNDER THE SILVER LAKE
CLIMAX
mid90s
HEREDITARY
Lady Bird
the KILLING of a SACRED DEER
The Florida Project
A FILM BY SEAN BAKER
GOOD TIME
MOONLIGHT
THE LOBSTER
THE VVITCH
AMY
ex machina
A MOST VIOLENT YEAR
REVENGE OF THE GREEN DRAGONS
UNDER THE SKIN
THE BLING RING
SPRING BREAKERS

Courtesy of A24 Films

When A24 was founded in New York in 2012, it was as a distributor, releasing what became 'cult' cinematic hits such as Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*, and Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring*. Over a decade on, A24 has transformed itself into a fully fledged studio, along the way becoming one of the world's leading entertainment brands and a cultural landmark of our times; its distinctive logo heading up the likes of Barry Jenkins' Oscar-winning *Moonlight*, Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's everything-winning *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, and Sam Levinson's TV phenomenon *Euphoria*.

Beyond the screen, A24's aesthetic influence has pervaded culture more widely, arguably shifting beauty standards and driving trends among younger audiences, most notably with its stable of partly street-cast actors and make-up focus in *Euphoria* (the #euphoriamakeup hashtag has generated over 2.6 billion views on TikTok, inspiring a host of bold, bright beauty looks on runways). Its graphic, headless torso T-shirts, ostensibly made to promote its unique brand of 'take it to nth degree' horror movies, are now 'holy grail' products too, selling out and reselling for suitably stomach-churning prices.

Ultimately, A24's success stems from its ability to embed itself in the culture and conversations of its digitally savvy audience. It has proved itself more than proficient in memes and virality, while the casting, hyper-stylized stories, and underlying values that help define an A24 production capture the attention of those prone to falling down social media rabbit holes.

So, why is a magazine about the fashion industry so interested in a film studio? Crudely put, A24 offers a masterclass in how the intersection of style, social media, storytelling and moving image now defines the branding strategy at the heart of any fashion house. And a remarkable red thread runs through A24's choice of collaborators – or 'creators', as they prefer to describe them – some of whom feature over the following pages. It is surely no coincidence that long-time fashion industry talent, a duo behind a cult clothing brand, vintage resellers, and young professionals who cut their teeth working for the world's most influential fashion magazines now make up the stable of creators currently driving the studio's success.

> **For both A24 and the likes of Miu Miu and Loewe, it’s a case of, literally, ‘everything everywhere all at once’ when it comes to holding people’s attention, stirring conversation online, and reaching consumers.**

Before I knew A24 was a production company, I knew it as something else entirely: one of the internet’s greatest merch stores. I discovered its entertainingly eclectic mix of tchotchkes through a zine and its selection felt surprising – certainly for a TV and film studio. Each ‘product’ – an XL bedazzled Furby necklace, a collection of 33 years’ worth of unpublished poetry by Val Kilmer, featuring praise from Cher, Sean Penn, and Robert Downey Jr. – brought a different facet of A24’s productions and personality to life. The playful, unexpected objects injected a dose of levity and a degree of virality, the assortment clearly leaning into the niche and idiosyncratic. For me, A24’s merch was a case of enter – rather than exit – through the gift shop.

That was back in the early days of A24, when the New York-based studio was still principally known for its role in distributing independent films. Roman Coppola’s *A Glimpse Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III* was the first, in February 2013; *Spring Breakers*, Harmony’s Korine’s provocative tale of girls-gone-bad, and *The Bling Ring*, Sofia Coppola’s fictionalization of real-life Hollywood teen heists, followed soon after. All were pivotal in establishing A24 as a studio for both auteurs and cinephiles.

Since then, and with its move into production, the studio has had a string of record-breaking successes. In 2022, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* broke the SAG Awards’ record for most wins by a single film, and along with Darren Aronofsky’s *The Whale*, meant A24 was the first indie studio in the Academy Awards’ 95-year history to win its top six awards (all four acting categories, best director and best picture).

This coronation came just a decade after the release of A24’s first fully produced film: Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*. Itself a multiple Academy Award-winner, the film set the A24 template: finance films that other studios won’t touch and prove that they can be both critical and commercial successes. As Hilton Als wrote of *Moonlight* in the *New Yorker* upon the film’s release in 2016: ‘I still don’t know how Jenkins got this flick made. But he did. And it changes everything.’

At a time when many audiences are trading in cinema tickets for streaming in the comfort of their own homes, it’s seen as risky to back daring productions. Yet A24 had no fear financing films such as Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*, described by critics as a deeply disturbing ‘new kind of horror’, or the jarringly relentless *Uncut Gems* by brothers Josh and Benny Safdie, featuring a sizeable cast of non-actors, plucked from relative obscurity off the streets of Manhattan, including fashion darling Julia Fox.

A24 productions share, despite their wildly disparate themes and directors’ styles, a strong anchoring in the cultural conversation, exploring topics that may seem provocative on the big screen, but are the subject of raucous debate and discussion on online forums and social platforms: homosexuality, class, race, scamming, the liberated sex lives of young, ‘badly behaved’ women, unsanitized coming-of-age themes. That goes in hand with the creative autonomy A24 affords its creators, whether directors or hair and make-up teams.

Daniel Katz, David Fenkel, and John Hodges – the film industry veterans who founded A24 – are unequivocal about their desire for the creative output of their collaborators to speak for itself (an internal policy bans company employees speaking on the record). In a rare interview that Katz and Fenkel gave to *Time* in 2023, they said that, ‘We’re here because of the artists we work with; their willingness to take risks and tell incredible stories continue to drive us at A24.’

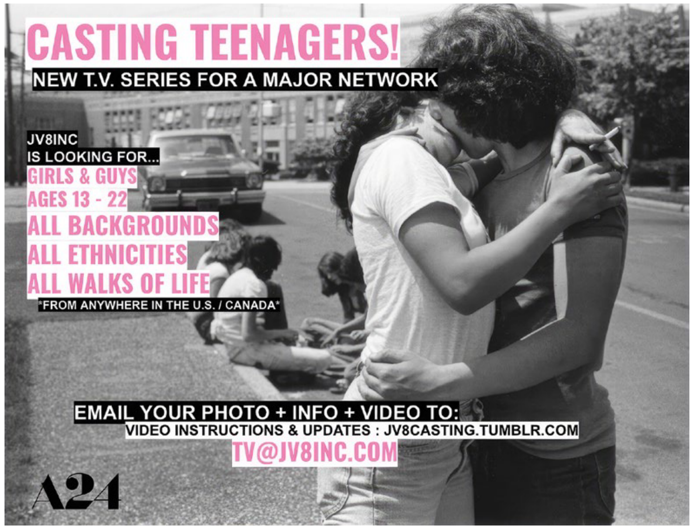
A24 has also become a stand-out brand thanks to its unique take on merchandise. No other studio goes to such lengths to differentiate itself through myriad products that both complement and set it apart from its on-screen productions. By offering its collaborators – from make-up artists and costume designers to casting directors – a platform to continue the creative conversation with clothing, coffee-table books, ‘inspired by’ make-up palettes, and more, all available through its online shop, A24 offers its hyper-engaged audience further, privileged access to its productions.

Fashion has increasingly been playing a key role in A24’s strategy. For example, the studio has been working closely with West Coast clothing brand Online Ceramics, founded by Alix Ross and Elijah Funk, to drop capsule collections tied to the release of its horror productions, a relationship that began with a series of graphic, sell-out styles for Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* in 2018. The duo is now also working on a book to be published by the studio’s publishing imprint, entirely unconnected to a specific upcoming release. A24 has also produced one-off accessories and products in the style of those featured in its films, such as the gold-plated Furby pendant worn by Adam Sandler’s character in *Uncut Gems*. And it has repeatedly partnered with New York’s Intramural shop to release several curated collections of vintage apparel for movie fans, ranging from a 1996 Cannes Film Festival T-shirt to a silk carré scarf by Giorgio Armani featuring a line-drawing of Martin Scorsese’s face.

A24 has also made a move into the beauty sphere, co-founding in 2022 cosmetics brand Half Magic with Donni Davy, the lead make-up artist on *Euphoria*. The brand is now producing make-up palettes inspired by the beauty looks of characters in A24 productions, such as a winged liner kit released to mark Sofia Coppola’s most recent feature film *Priscilla* (which immediately sold out).

The influence has been such that fashion brands are now borrowing from the A24 playbook to engage bigger audiences. They have begun to build their own ‘cinematic’ universes to bring the vision of a creative director to life, assembling a cast of characters who play a key role in communicating the brand values for audiences in still and moving-image content. For example, Miu Miu, working with up-and-coming ingenues as ambassadors that feature in its cinematic campaigns, on the runway and front row at fashion shows, as well as ‘Women’s Tales’, its anthology of short films by female directors given free rein to create films featuring its clothes. And Jonathan Anderson, who, alongside producing a short film for Loewe with director Luca Guadagnino, has extended his fashion vocabulary into cinema, designing costumes for *Challengers* (incidentally featuring Loewe campaign star, Josh O’Connor, as one of its leads).

For both A24 and the world’s leading fashion brands, it’s a case of, literally, ‘everything everywhere all at once’ when it comes to the panoramic strategy for reaching consumers – building a culture around each project and creative collaborator that all offer myriad ways to capture and hold people’s attention, and stir conversation online. ‘Maybe in a purist sense, that’s not auteurism, that’s not cinema, and there’s something uncouth about it,’ Barry Jenkins told the *Guardian* about the studio’s approach to creating so much noise around each project with such an eclectic mix of content and product. ‘Yet, I think that in order for the company to remain robust, opening up art to these commercial opportunities is part of that.’ Be it conceptual fashion design or a heart-wrenching tale of once-forbidden love, everything, it now seems, can be hyped into unprecedented levels of success. Call it the A24 touch.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Original casting flyer for *Euphoria* season one, 2018.

# Jennifer Venditti

**Casting director**

Jennifer Venditti doesn't think of herself as a casting director, despite having over 20 years experience playing a hand in putting people in front of the camera – in fashion, TV, and film – and being responsible for the mix of talent in A24's *Euphoria*, *Uncut Gems*, *Good Time*, and more. Venditti's approach to casting might seem familiar now, seeing streetcast models fill the runways and campaigns of major fashion brands. But in 1998, when she began her career in fashion, eschewing conventional beauty standards with an emphasis on presence and character over, say, height, was atypical. As was her approach to finding the 'right' people.

Film played a key role in Venditti's process, recording video interviews with people that the 'explorer', as she describes herself, found having travelled to unexpected places with a handheld camera and immersing herself in communities to discover talent. Her interviews, Polaroids, and casting-call flyers are the subject of *Can I Ask You A Question?*, the A24-published book documenting her approach to casting the likes of Angus Cloud, an actor with no experience or training prior to appearing as Fezco in *Euphoria*, alongside established actors known worldwide. The shift in her 20-year career is significant, with social media playing a role in representation and access. But Venditti still applies an unorthodox approach to her pursuit of talent that has proven to make a lasting cultural impact.

Photograph by Peter Ash Lee

Stills from casting videos for *Euphoria*, season one, 2018, and season two, 2020.

Images: Alan Scott Neal

**How did your relationship with A24 start?**

The first project that I worked on with them was *American Honey*.[1] The director Andrea Arnold wanted it to be a less traditional process for narrative filmmaking, with more of an organic, documentary approach. That was definitely woven into the casting. I worked with many different scouts, and we really lived with many different communities for that casting process, which isn't normal – certainly not for feature film, and definitely not for fashion at that time. Actually, for me, thinking about that, A24 was kind of the equivalent of *W* magazine for me, and working with its creative director Dennis Freedman. When I first started in fashion, it wasn't normal to send someone all over the world and just say, 'Here's a theme, go find what you think would be right for that in terms of the people', and then travel all over the world doing that. A24 is really supportive of the creative process and all the players that make that happen. Andrea Arnold wanted authenticity, which meant travelling all over, and they supported that with full creative autonomy. I didn't realize at the time, but looking back, I know that isn't the traditional approach elsewhere, but it is the standard with them.

**What do you mean when you say 'the traditional approach'?**

Normally, you'd contact agencies and audition actors. You don't go to random strip clubs and beaches in Florida to look for people. I had to create my own process and ways of seeing if those people could actually act.

**So, it's like the difference in fashion between going to a modelling agency and asking 'who's on your books?' and streetcasting.**

Oh, yes, you email all the modelling agencies, you tell them the details, they send you packages, you go through and edit, you schedule a casting, you see the people, you book the people. In movies, you send out a breakdown to agents and managers, they submit people, you pick them, you audition them, you then make an offer to someone if they have a body of work that you can already see. Just like in fashion, if someone's famous enough that they don't need to do a casting, you just book them. Yeah, so that would be the traditional way. With *American Honey*, it was just staying in an area and getting to know people and working with them. And then seeing what we could find and deciding if we were going to move on; picking certain parts of America and focusing on those.

**How did you go about finding people then?**

We did an actual open call in real life. I really need time to know the place and get to know people. I have lots of different processes. I think, with that project, I sent an edited version of interviews of people I thought were interesting. Maybe some improv with them. It's much more complicated than I'm saying. I do think, at the beginning, people had this misconception that you just find some people on the street, and it's not like that. Even for fashion, not everyone can take a picture even if they have a beautiful face. It can be a very long process. I might need a month before I'm going to send a director anything. That project was really specific, and the world is very different now. At that time, there wasn't Instagram.

**You told the *New York Times*[2] you don't identify as a casting director. How do you see your role?**

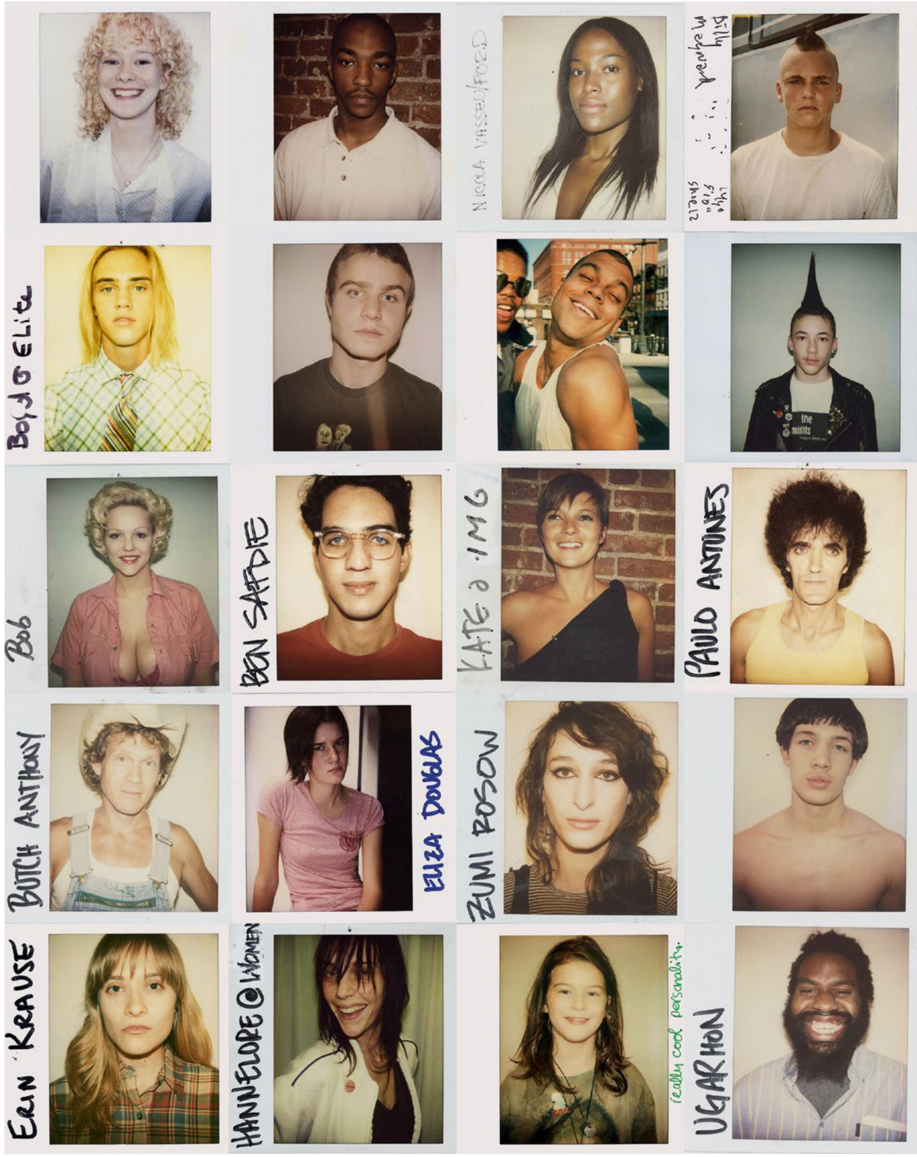
This is my constant dilemma, but I think I'm just an explorer of humanity. I don't know. I'm not really like studying and commenting on it, but I do think I'm exploring it for myself and for the people who hire me. When I take a job, I wonder, 'Who would this person be? What would they be like?' And I don't just look for non-actors. I cast tonnes of actors the traditional way as well. I'm not a purist in that I only do alternative casting. There can be a kind of magic between a non-actor and an actor too.

Even in fashion – it sounds stupid to say, because it's such a big thing now – when I started, the examples of beauty were very narrow and limited. I wanted to see more ideas of beauty, and that's how I feel about cinema. Sometimes, with the representation of certain people, it doesn't feel like I'm watching a movie. There's something about having someone a little bit more authentic and raw that is exciting to me, because I want to see humanity reflected on the screen. I want to see examples of what it is to be human.

**In terms of how that translates into a practical process, what is your process from start to finish?**

Every project is different. The first thing is the script; sometimes there's a book as well, sometimes there are

> **'You don't normally go to random strip clubs and beaches in Florida to cast people. I had to create my own processes and ways of seeing.'**



Casting Polaroids by Jennifer Venditti, New York, 2001-2007.

DONALD
EUGENE HÜTZ
BEVERLY COOKE
DIVERSITY PLAYERS OF HARLEM presents
GISELE, MG
JOSH SAFDIE
LILY SCHACTMAN
DEVIN CUTHBERTSON
DIANE T.
BOGDAN K.
RONALD WRANOVICS

Casting Polaroids by Jennifer Venditti, New York, 2000-2007.

articles, and then it's a deep conversation. For *American Honey*, no one came to an office to audition. We planned a whole trip and brought people to a place where the environment was like a nondescript outdoor place, and I had a non-professional actor there who did improv with these people. So, we'd be on a sidewalk somewhere in Bushwick, filming them with handheld cameras. For *Uncut Gems*, it was similar. I made a list of the people from the script that I felt would be better served by someone who was more authentic; that would give something to the character that an actor wouldn't.

**You mentioned Instagram; does that play a role in the casting process too?**
We didn't use it for those two projects. *Euphoria* was the first one that we did that on. For both of those other projects, we did open calls as well. I swear to God, we thought so many people were gonna come; we put flyers everywhere. And, like, 50 people came. When we were doing *Euphoria*, we had an open call in a basement, and 20 people came. No one knew what it was. It made no sense. What I learned from *Euphoria* was that, for young people, it is way better to have an online open call than to do something in person.

## 'When we were casting for *Euphoria*, we put flyers out everywhere and had an open call in a basement, but only 20 people came. No one knew what it was.'

**Is that just because you're looking for a demographic that spends a lot more time online?**
Yeah. We used to scout all the time in malls; when we used to do fashion stuff, that was the place to go. But malls have been dead for a very long time. The culture is very different. So, when we did the open call for *Euphoria*, I was like, 'This is such a bust.' Barely anyone came. Then when we did season two, and we did an online open call, it was insane. Around 10,000 people submitted. It seems obvious, but it really opens it up. I just did another project for A24 called *The Sympathizer*[3], which was a very tall order of casting. It's a predominantly Vietnamese cast, and they have to speak Vietnamese and English. So, we had to do a lot of online open calls. Again, that really opens it up; you're so surprised by the ages and backgrounds that make it in front of you.

**You've said video interviews are a big part of your casting process, even from your time working in fashion.**
The reason I got into fashion was because I liked the story that clothing could tell about a person. I was asking everyone in fashion all these questions and interviewing them, and I felt limited, because I had a box of tapes that no one in the fashion industry cared about. They just wanted to see the Polaroid, but I was filming everyone as well. Even for still photos, someone has to have an energy about them. For me, they have to be comfortable moving. I'm approaching the casting process as if I'm making the film as well. That is how I understood if I could push someone and be like, 'This person is magic.'

**What kinds of questions do you ask?**
If there are people scouting for me, I give them a list of general questions that revolve around the role; to see if the person has a connection to the character in some way. I couldn't give you a list of the questions I ask, because it's not rehearsed – it's a conversation. But it's a spiritual exchange for me; I'm reading a person, I'm feeling the room. [Filmmaker] Josh Safdie and a producer working with him said to me, 'Oh my god, I could just watch a movie of these interviews.' I wanted to do that long before the [A24] book; to make a documentary of the interviews.

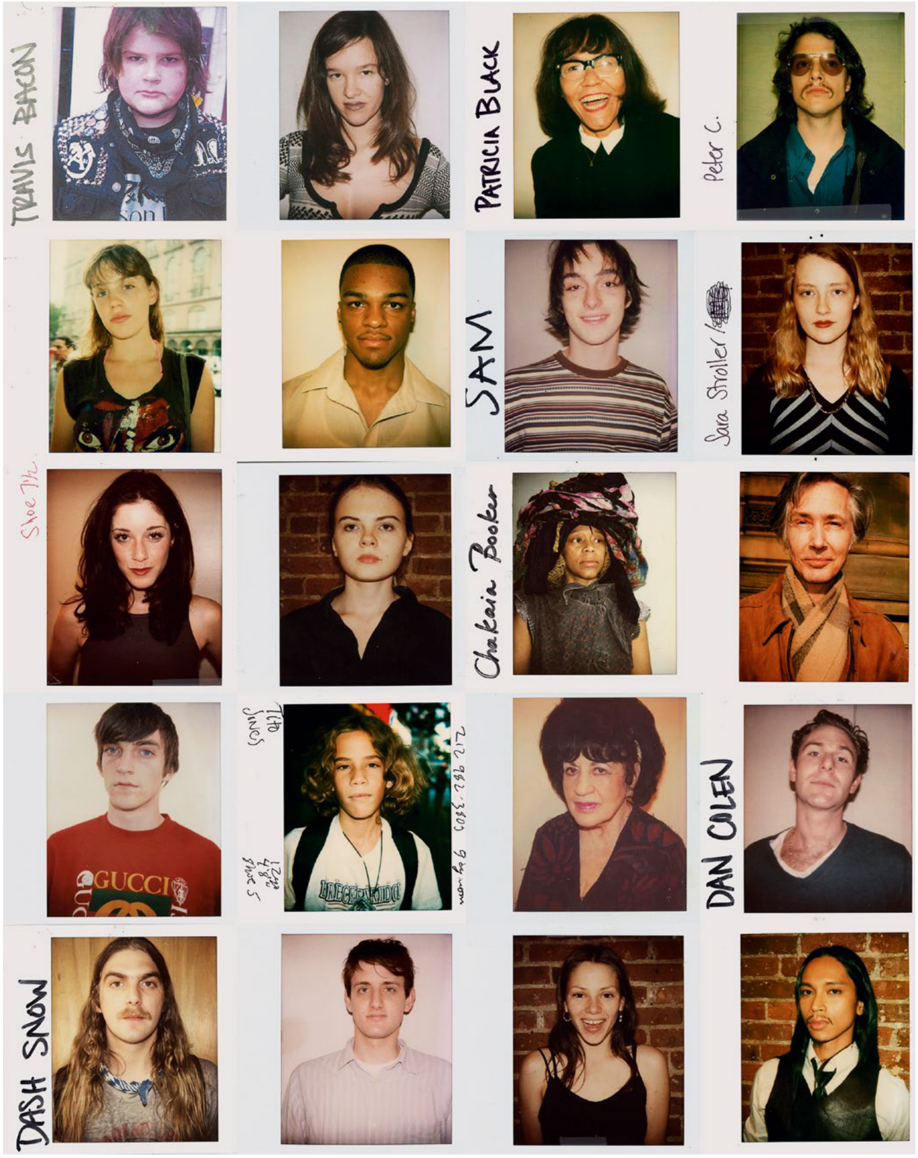
**It seems natural then to editorialize everything that you've built, documenting the process. But how did the book with A24 actually come about?**
I always kept everything, but I thought that I was gonna have a gallery show of all my Polaroids or something. I've always dreamed of making a documentary; I never thought of a book. I was talking to producers and pitching it as a documentary, and we were trying to figure out the legality of using all those clips; the copyright and all that. Then A24 contacted me, because they were making the *Euphoria* book, and they asked me if I wanted to interview Angus [Cloud]. So, I did the interview with Angus, and they heard I had this material, and were like, 'Wow, we should do a project.' I still would like to do the film version.

**How have you seen the culture of casting across industries change in the past 20 years?**
It's just so interesting to see the culture catch up. There's more character with streetcasting modelling agencies, and I love the rebirth of *Interview* with Mel [Ottenberg], bringing so much life to the conversations in magazines again.

There's so much episodic documentary content. We live in a culture now where the idea of beauty has become a more diverse and expansive expression, and it's beautiful to see we're kind of living in the future that I saw 20 years ago. There are still people who are not being represented, and this kind of casting now gives us the opportunity to say, 'Okay, we're not just going to use someone who *looks* Vietnamese.' We can actually go find authentic Vietnamese people, like we have with *The Sympathizer*, and I'm proud we never have to be like, 'Well, we just can't find this.' We can, so let's go. So, credit to A24 for giving me the autonomy and trust, and understanding that it takes time. This is happening in a studio system, and I have many other examples of me doing this work in the beginning of my career, where it's like, 'Well, how long is it going to take? We can't afford that. We can't do it like that.'

**Does your experience in casting for fashion inform your casting for film and TV?**

I do want to say that my experience in fashion has totally informed my casting work. With *Euphoria*, I knew Barbie [Ferreira] and Hunter [Schafer], because I had worked in fashion. I always send my breakdowns for films to all the modelling agencies too, because I believe there are so many incredibly interesting girls that never made it. They weren't big models, but they were so cool and interesting, and film and TV might be another avenue for them. So, even if I'm not doing fashion stuff all the time, I am incorporating all my contacts, and all the stuff I know about the industry, and giving them an opportunity as well. One thing that really stood out for me too, in both, is that casting is rarely recognized. You know, the make-up has an Oscar, but casting isn't even acknowledged as a category; that's possibly because we're not on set. But our job is the most important at the very beginning, even though once the filming starts, we're no longer involved. I just feel so grateful that A24 sees it that way; that it felt worthy of a book. It's hard to take a risk on anything, but they have given space to every creative at every stage. I went to a film festival recently and everyone was talking about the future of cinema and TV. Everyone was devastated, being very doomsday. But someone rightfully pointed out that A24 is getting new voices into cinema; not just on the screen, but in so many interesting ways. They're getting people to go to the movie theatre, but also more. After Covid, everyone's on the verge of being bankrupt. But A24 always stayed in their lane, and were so consistent with their own branding. It's never inauthentic.



Casting Polaroids by Jennifer Venditti, New York, 2000-2007.

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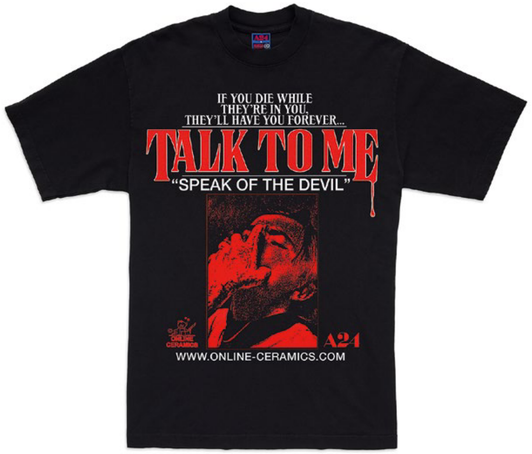
1. *American Honey* is a 2016 road drama film, starring Sasha Lane, Shia LaBeouf and Riley Keough. The film was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival where it won the Jury Prize. The team headed to Oklahoma in 2015 for street casting, looking at people on beaches, streets, and public places like Walmart and dollar stores.

2. The *New York Times* wrote a profile piece on Venditti in 2022 to mark the launch of her book released with A24.

3. *The Sympathizer* is an upcoming blackly comic historical drama series for television based on the 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name by Viet Thanh Nguyen. Alongside Vietnamese actors, it includes performances by Sandra Oh and Robert Downey Jr. The miniseries is set to be released in 2024.



Black ‘Speak of the Devil’ T-shirt from the Online Ceramics x *Talk To Me* collection, 2022. Opposite page: Alix Ross and Elijah Funk in their Los Angeles studio.

# Online Ceramics

**Alix Ross and Elijah Funk, co-founders**

Online Ceramics was not the brand we now know it as when it first partnered with A24. The California-based fashion label, founded by Alix Ross and Elijah Funk in 2016, had a modest reputation, known for its trippy tie-dye T-shirts chiefly related to the pair's shared obsession with the Grateful Dead. However, since the duo's first official collaboration with A24, in 2018, their success has seen them collaborate with the likes of Marc Jacobs, The North Face, and Casio, while still using fashion as the framework to express their shared interests in everything that exists outside of it. They've collaborated with the estates of New Age spiritualist Ram Dass, and musicians Fela Kuti and Alice Coltrane, and continue to fuse trippy and cheerily macabre motifs in their standalone collections.

Having met at the Columbus College of Art and Design, starting a clothing brand wasn't Ross and Funk's primary goal. That was to create art, wearing the subjects of their fandom on their sleeves – one of which, naturally, given their smiley spin on the spooky and subversive, is horror films. That's how Online Ceramics' relationship with A24 began – unofficially, at least. The official co-sign came after Ross and Funk had already designed T-shirts for Ari Aster's film *Hereditary*. They're now fully integrated into the A24 fold, designing collections for *X*, *Saint Maud*, *Midsommar*, *Pearl*, and more.

Photograph by Kobe Wagstaff. Opposite page: courtesy A24 Films.

LOVE OUR MOTHER
Tree Hugging Dirt Worshipper

**How did your relationship with A24 officially come about?**
**Alix Ross:** One thing that I had always dreamed of was making T-shirts for movies, or making merch for movies, and I remember seeing the trailer for *Hereditary* when it aired at Sundance [in 2018], and *scrambling* to find a contact. We tried every way, and it was kind of a lost cause. Then when the film was close to coming out, Elijah and I decided, 'We're just going to make bootlegs of the movie merch and hope we don't get sued.' Luckily, our friend Will Welch, the editor of *GQ*, realized we were trying to reach out, and connected us to Zoe [Beyer], A24's creative director. By some miracle, she knew who we were. So, we sent her what were going to be the bootlegs for *Hereditary*, and she was down for it. That was it: 'Let's do it.' Zero oversight, just, 'Here's a higher-res image instead of a screenshot.'

## 'Full transparency, we've designed quite a few A24 collections without even a screener. We just watch the trailer and think, 'Okay, we get the vibe.'

**What was the turnaround time?**
**Alix:** A week or two before the film was released. We work with *very* quick turnarounds. Any time you see us drop anything, the likelihood is that we were designing that stuff 24 hours before. But A24 is always down for that every time we go into a job. It's always tight. They'll come to us and say, 'You guys have one week', and they know we're still going to make it fly.

**So, how do you and A24 decide which projects to create products around?**
**Alix:** They're always keeping in touch about what's coming up and seeing if we have interest in certain projects. It's very much a question of, 'Do you want to do this?' And we've never turned anything down. Then when it comes down to us actually doing a project, they're so open to our ideas.

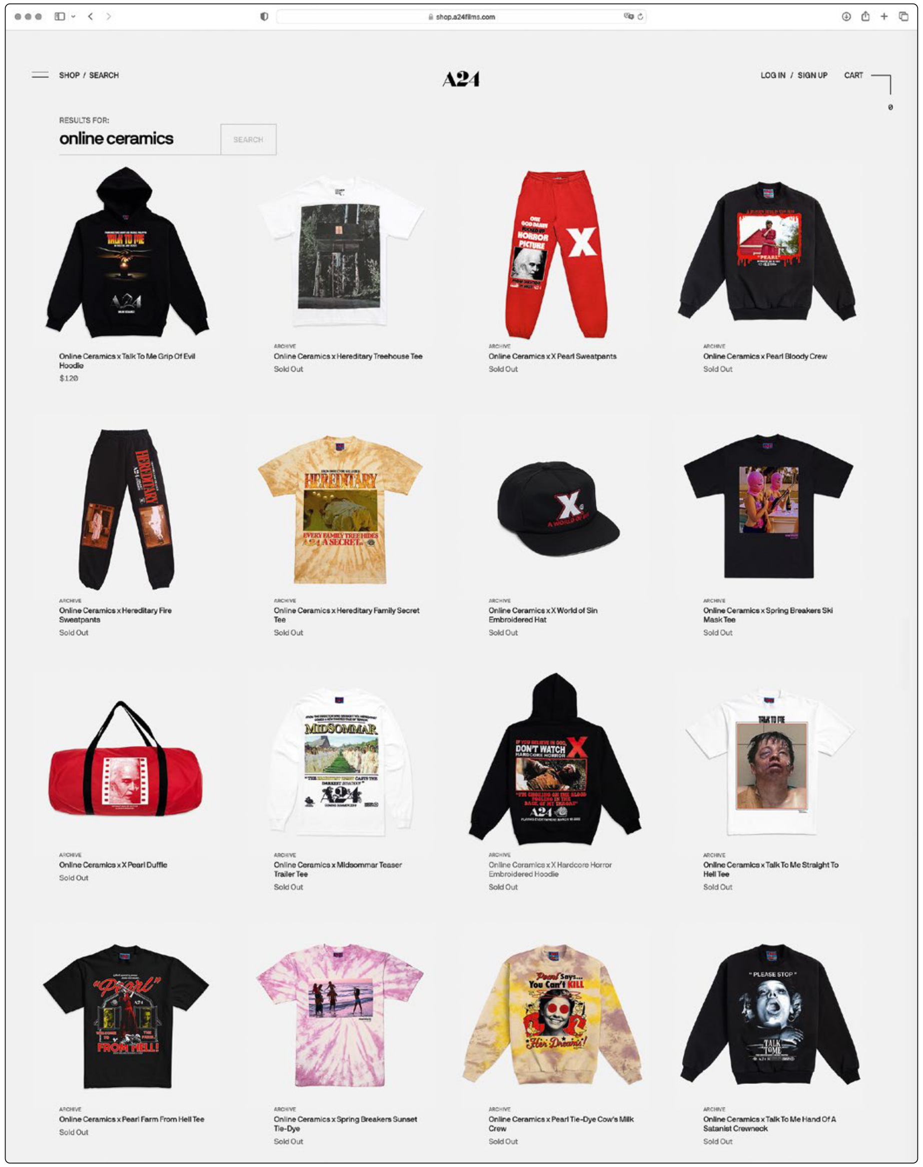
**When they come to you a week or two ahead of a film's launch, what are they coming to you with? Is there a creative brief? Do you watch the films?**
**Elijah Funk:** Full transparency, we've done quite a few collections without even a screener. We've just watched the trailer and thought, 'Okay, we get the vibe with this, seems cool.' I kind of like that we have that reactive relationship where we're kind of going in blind on both sides sometimes. It keeps it fresh and exciting. One of my favourite things about what we've done the whole time is the challenge – especially when we've worked with musicians and artists – of creating IP around something. Essentially, fan art; that's what makes me feel satisfied. I can't tell you how many times we've gotten assets from a movie and not used the logo. Part of the fun of doing this is – for lack of a better phrase – catching a vibe and creating art that feels appropriate and makes sense, or pushing it in different directions. So, a lot of the times when we work with A24, it will be like, 'Send us whatever you want.' I think that's what they like about us. Anyone could just drop the logo and a photo on a T-shirt and call it a day. Oftentimes, we'll even make up the copy for the T-shirts; we'll create taglines and things. It just creates a whole different atmosphere around it.

**To go back to your decision to approach A24, you could've just put out the T-shirts you'd already designed, but you were still pushing to make it a formal partnership. Why?**
**Alix:** At the time, as a business, we were starting to get press and we had just got into Dover Street Market. We were starting to become more of a crystallized thing. But for the most part, I feel like people assumed we were just hippies making tie-dye T-shirts; only into the Grateful Dead. I didn't like the narrative that was starting to form, and I thought that maybe if we could officially work with A24, it would send a really clear message that there's a darkness to Online Ceramics too, especially with *Hereditary*, because it's such a dark film.

**What do you think you've taken from your ongoing collaboration with A24?**
**Alix:** I'm not very knowledgeable about the history of merch, and there's been movie merch for a very long time, but I was not aware that a company like A24 would take merch so seriously. Before we started working with them, I knew they had been doing merch, but I saw our collaboration as being like a new twist on movie merch.

**What was the response? Did you find it opened you up to a new audience of cinephiles and horror fans too?**
**Alix:** I think that fans on both sides responded well, because it was kind of similar to how we reimagined Grateful Dead merch. Elijah applied his flyer design and T-shirt-making [skills] from his time playing in hardcore bands; applying that aesthetic to Grateful Dead-style merch. I feel like we tried to

Courtesy A24 Films



Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Grip Of Evil Hoodie
$120

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Hereditary Treehouse Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X Pearl Sweatpants
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Pearl Bloody Crew
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Hereditary Fire Sweatpants
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Hereditary Family Secret Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X World of Sin Embroidered Hat
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Spring Breakers Ski Mask Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X Pearl Duffle
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Midsommar Teaser Trailer Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X Hardcore Horror Embroidered Hoodie
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Straight To Hell Tee
Sold Out

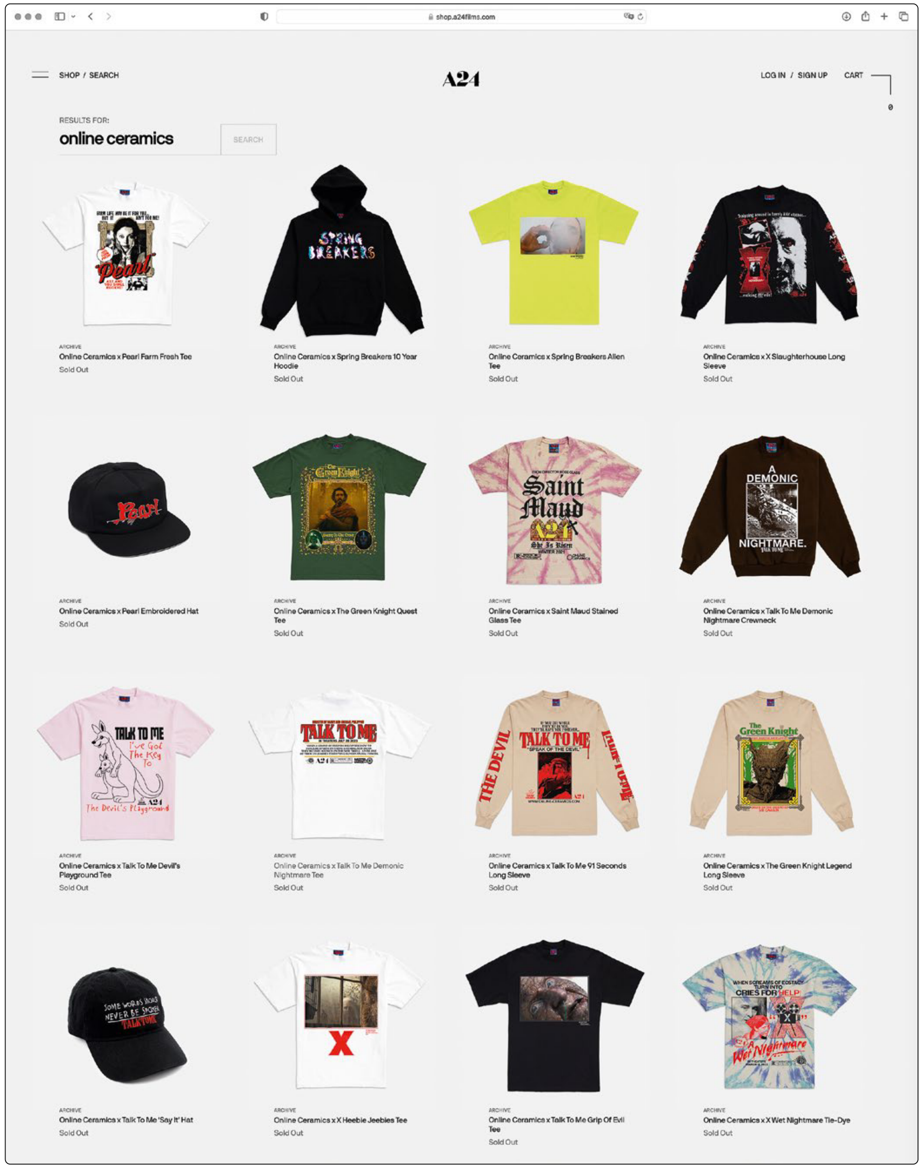
ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Pearl Farm From Hell Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Spring Breakers Sunset Tie-Dye
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Pearl Tie-Dye Cow's Milk Crew
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Hand Of A Satanist Crewneck
Sold Out

Online Ceramics x A24 merch page, a24films.com.



ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Pearl Farm Fresh Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Spring Breakers 10 Year Hoodie
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Spring Breakers Alien Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X Slaughterhouse Long Sleeve
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Pearl Embroidered Hat
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x The Green Knight Quest Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Saint Maud Stained Glass Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Demonic Nightmare Crewneck
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Devil's Playground Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Demonic Nightmare Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me 91 Seconds Long Sleeve
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x The Green Knight Legend Long Sleeve
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me 'Say It' Hat
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X Heebie Jeebies Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x Talk To Me Grip Of Evil Tee
Sold Out

ARCHIVE
Online Ceramics x X Wet Nightmare Tie-Dye
Sold Out

Online Ceramics x A24 merch page, a24films.com.

Courtesy A24 Films

do something similar with movie merch in a way that felt new to me.

**Elijah:** When we were kids, I remember movie merch being actually really cool – weird Freddy Krueger and Chucky merch. I think something happened where the movie world got like… Marvel movies. It just wasn't very interesting or artful. Everything got really digital and rendered, but if you look back at old horror, or even just old VHS tapes and books, it's this really graphic thing. We were like, 'Oh, we could apply what the back of a VHS tape would look like in 1987 to *Hereditary*, and bring it into this contemporary lens.'

**That brings me to the role of merch. You can look at it practically, maybe cynically, for a company as big as A24 as a valuable marketing tool. But in the context of your work, it's been more linked to community and fandom. So, what does merch mean to you?**

**Elijah:** At the end of the day, I just love art, music, movies, books. I'm just the biggest fan. Online Ceramics is our way to participate in things we really admire without just consuming them. I often feel like I've gotten to sneak in the back door of things that I really love and be a part of them. Merch can do that. And I love that a kid who works at the mall can save up and get one of our $50 T-shirts and feel like they're a part of something. I like that it can be really participatory for everyone; it makes it a bigger project, rather than just 'Here's the movie, watch it and go home.'

**You're currently working on a book with A24. How did that come about?**

**Alix:** The amount of stuff we've done with them has allowed them to come further into our world too, and this felt like a special opportunity to encapsulate our history together. The book is an oral history of [our company] Haunted Wagon, Inc., formatted similarly to how they do other books. Kind of *Interview* mag style, where we bring in cool people and collaborators to have conversations around the work we've done.

**How do you think that fits into the wider world of A24; publishing a book that is as much about the collaborators as the specific work they do for each project?**

**Elijah:** When we first came up with the concept, it was simply going to be a book about every T-shirt. When they proposed this storytelling element of our history, I was like, 'I can't even believe our favourite movie studio would entertain the idea of wanting to tell our story.'

**How has your relationship affected the way you work as Online Ceramics? Has it impacted the scale of your business?**

**Alix:** It's been extremely helpful. I feel like, if we're talking about fashion, A24 is basically perceived as a 'fashionable' brand, and it would be the same as having a really respected fashion house behind you. Without them, I'm certain that we would have figured it out, but it was the first thing that immediately started to build our world and show people what we were about. It has been critical to our success.

**Elijah:** What it created for us, as a business, can't be understated. We were working from a small room, and then it's like, 'Okay, make *Hereditary* T-shirts…' Well, how do we do that when all we have is a four-colour screenprinting press that we're doing ourselves? Okay, so we're going to outsource printing now, and we can print neck labels. We had advanced so quickly around what felt like a 'do-or-die' moment. I feel like we stuck the landing on it and have been running ever since.

**For fashion brands in particular, film is another tool in communicating what they're about. Has collaborating with A24 changed the way you think about communicating with your audience?**

**Alix:** Definitely. I don't know if we can make a film, but I think that's a dream of ours at some point. Before working with them, it was very much like we saw the world expanding in our heads, but we didn't know how to approach or do that. It's helped us create or expand in a way that felt natural to us, letting us see what's possible.

**Elijah:** We were already 'fine artists', thinking very dimensionally outside of T-shirts, and this felt like an offshoot art project that satisfied one part of artmaking. The relationship with them was a catalyst saying, 'You guys can continue to make art in all of these directions.' We can do photoshoots. We can do an art show. We can work on movies. We can still work with musicians. We can go down these different paths. We can start sub-brands about mushrooms, scary stuff, books, music, and create our own cinematic universe. You know, we do actually have the access now to not just make T-shirts, even though that's currently our bread and butter and what we're best known for.

> **'When we were kids, weird Freddy Krueger and Chucky merch was really cool. Then something happened and the movie world got all... Marvel.'**

Priscilla
HALF MAGIC

*Priscilla* x Half Magic eye set.

# Donni Davy

**Make-up artist and co-founder, Half Magic**

There are plenty of make-up brands launched off the back of make-up artists' success in cinema, or offering specialist products for the screen; Max Factor, one of the world's longest-running and most successful, among them. There are make-up brand collaborations with movie and TV franchises too: NYX and *Barbie*, Urban Decay and *Game of Thrones*. But a production company launching its own cosmetics brand, as A24 did in 2022, is atypical. When California-native Donni Davy was brought on as Head of Make-up for *Euphoria*, having worked on two quite different A24 films prior, no one could have predicted the impact of the high-colour, shimmering looks she created. Dramatic and expressive, intended to reflect the emotional intensity of teen life, #euphoriamakeup went viral, and characters' graphic looks were the subject of myriad headlines and 'how to' tutorials across social media. Their impact reached far beyond the screen, inspiring *Euphoria*-style editorials in fashion magazines, and similar painterly, rhinestone styles on runways.

Davy, having won two Emmys for Outstanding Contemporary Make-up for the show, was as surprised as everyone else when, following its virality, A24 offered to co-found and back Half Magic, a standalone beauty brand – one that was available in Ulta and Beauty Bay, more than A24's own e-store. Now, having established itself, it's being tapped as a vehicle to promote the studio's other productions, evolving beyond *Euphoria*, producing limited palettes intended to create altogether different looks by other make-up artists. For example, a sell-out winged-liner set for Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla*, with other collections pegged to forthcoming projects.

Photograph by Max Farago. Opposite page: courtesy Half Magic.

**Donni, how did your relationship with A24 begin?**
My introduction to them was when I met [producer] Adele Romanski on the set of *Moonlight*[1], which was one of the first feature films I did, and when A24 was much smaller. I didn't know much about film companies, but I knew they were doing cool stuff, and I thought, 'I'm *in* if they ever want to hire me for another movie.'

**What was the next project; were there more before *Euphoria*?**
When Adele went on to produce another A24 film called *Under the Silver Lake* – starring Andrew Garfield – and the director David Robert Mitchell wanted really cool make-up. He was like, 'I want colour. I want glitter. I want rhinestones. I want everything. I want make-up that goes off the clothes, and creates this very heightened sensory world around Andrew Garfield's character.' Until that point, my resume didn't have any colour work on it, though. After *Moonlight*, I was actually getting more jobs wanting gritty make-up: lots of wounds and special effects; very realistic stuff. I really *wanted* to do more colour work. I landed *Under the Silver Lake* having put my own photoshoots together, showing I *could* do that. I worked out of grocery store parking lots with models and photographers that I found on Craigslist. It was deliberately more editorial-looking stuff. That movie put me much more on the radar of A24, especially because they were much bigger after *Moonlight*, meaning there were a lot more producers on set, so I feel like they were closer to my work. I guess it stuck with them, because a couple of years later, I was called to come in for the *Euphoria* pilot.

**'I landed *Under the Silver Lake* having put my own photoshoots together, working in parking lots with models and photographers I found on Craigslist.'**

**It's interesting, because having a hair and make-up team that you know and frequently work with is common in fashion, but you wouldn't expect that of a film and TV production company, where there are different directors and teams involved.**
Often with hair and make-up it's just like, 'Okay, let's just get who's available.' We're brought on at the very last minute, usually the last department to come on and start prep, because there's still this pretty old-school thinking about hair and make-up, that it's just powder and hairspray. Nowadays, the whole relationship between talent and hair and make-up is extremely important. A lot of the editorial and red carpet make-up is so beautiful and so high-end, and then the actors start to get used to it, and they want that. I've never been interested in doing red carpet make-up, but I've always really wanted to bridge that gap between what you might call a traditional film and TV approach and the modern, endless possibilities of what make-up could be on the red carpet, in magazines, et cetera. With A24, they hyper-believe in creatives. That's what they do with their directors; trusting their directors to create these wild, sometimes absurd, unusual films. And they're really great risk takers, so I think when they sign up creatives, they're just like 'Well, we like this person, so we're all in.' It's a really cool process to have the trust to bring more creativity to what you do.

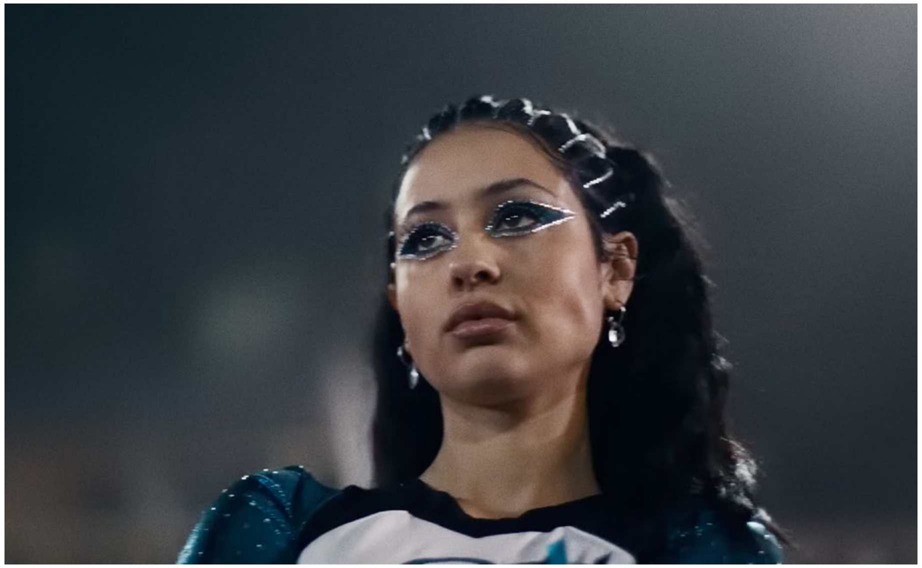
**In terms of the process, how do you approach each project?**
It all depends on the director. [*Euphoria* creator] Sam Levinson, for example, had a pretty impressive, extensive make-up vocabulary to communicate what he wanted: colour make-up that's gonna make people pause the screen to look again. I came in with a moodboard, he was like, 'Yes, *but more*.' He explained he really wanted me to use the show as a means to showcase make-up as self expression on these six characters.

**What types of images were on the moodboard? Did fashion imagery play any role in creating these more 'editorial' looks, as you describe them?**
A lot of gritty stuff, like photographs by Nan Goldin, Larry Clark film stills; there was Christina Ricci in *Buffalo '66*.[2] There was some fashion stuff, and also my fashion stuff mixed with shots from runway shows. They couldn't look like runway looks, though. They had to bridge the gap between fashion editorial and real life. I had screenshots of girls on Instagram with pink, blushing noses and winged liner, and that kind of aesthetic that we still see now from Gen Z on TikTok. But these were before that all became mainstream.

**'I want make-up that makes people pause the screen' is quite a mandate from Sam Levinson. What are your thoughts on the power of make-up, creatively and commercially, to have that impact? How much was the commercial aspect baked into the creative, considering you launched a make-up brand**

Courtesy of A24 Films

Cailee Spaeny in Sofia Coppola's *Priscilla*, 2023.



Alexa Demie in Sam Levinson's *Euphoria*, 2018.

Courtesy of HBO

**with A24 off the back of *Euphoria*?**
Zero, for me. I was hired to direct the make-up department and deliver this vision, not thinking, 'This is my break to have a make-up line or get famous.' I was thinking more about the storytelling, and Sam wanted the make-up to be really visible for that to land successfully. Crazily, that resulted in people identifying with their make-up so much that it became a commercial thing. I should add that Sam *loves* make-up. He's obsessed. He watches YouTube videos, he knows the lingo, and the way people make themselves up on Instagram. He loves it as a means of self expression. It became commercial once the show aired, and people reacted.

**Let's talk about the decision to launch Half Magic. There are so many collaborations between fashion and beauty brands these days, but you and A24 decided to launch a standalone line, rather than collaborating with an existing one. Why and how did that happen?**
Well, the *Euphoria* make-up blew-up. My platform just exploded on social media, and I had so many followers and beauty magazines reaching out. I was doing interviews constantly, in every moment of free time. I could barely keep up with it all. Then brands started coming to me and asking to do little collaborations, like choosing the colours for an eyeshadow palette, or whatever. Then two of A24's creative producers – Sam Levinson's righthand guys – called me asking, 'Hey, how's it going?', and I was like, 'Good… brands are reaching out, it's kind of crazy.' And they were like, 'Well, do you want to have a brand?' Just like that on the phone. I said, 'Sure, of course.'

**Did you ask why they'd want to? Because it feels so unexpected for a TV and film studio to launch a standalone beauty brand.**
First of all, I thought, 'This is so fun', because I love A24. And if the make-up was going to become commercial, which clearly it was, I was getting nervous about other brands coming to me saying, 'We want you to design this huge campaign for this huge new launch'. I felt like I'd be cheating on A24 and Sam, giving all that creative energy to some huge multi-billion dollar make-up brand. It's also this cultural movement we had developed, and I didn't just want to give it to another brand. Clearly, at that moment in time, [A24] understood that the make-up had become hugely commercial, or else they wouldn't have funded and co-founded it with me. I'm not a beauty person. I'm a film and TV make-up artist. I don't know anything about the beauty industry, and they still trusted me, and I was kind of shocked. We all knew it would be a long process, where we'd have to find the right team and all that. I wasn't wary, but I did think: 'How are we going to do this? How are we going to build it from scratch?'

**Who did you have to bring on board to bring it to life?**
The first person we brought on was a product developer; she is a little younger than me, and came from a high-end brand. Then our general manager, who's a mastermind with 22 years of experience in building beauty brands from the ground up; working with huge, mega brands in-house.[3]

**Other beauty brands have to produce their own campaign imagery to market their brands. Is *Euphoria* a route to marketing Half Magic, using visuals from the show to create content?**
This was a very important topic, because we are not a *Euphoria* make-up brand. HBO is not involved. We can't use any verbiage from the show. We cannot use anything. But what I see in other brands is that they'll have an eyeshadow palette called 'Eye-phoria'. So, it's funny that everyone else can capitalize on it. We don't have any IP licence from the show, and we don't really talk about it. What we have though, is me. So, I do loads of video content on my channels, and I can share *Euphoria* tidbits and stuff, but I can't show screenshots or have an image of an actor and say, 'I used this.' I talk about Half Magic making those types of looks possible, and we talk about my experience in the film and TV industry, and as a thought leader now in the beauty community. I like to position myself a lot like a teacher – like a make-up fairy godmother-type, who can show you how to do certain looks and which products to use. We consciously didn't pay to licence or call it '*Euphoria* make-up'. We *wanted* it to be different. We wanted it to stand on its own and be able to grow into whatever it would grow into; whatever's happening culturally, and whichever other projects I have. We didn't want to pigeonhole it.

**How is that going to evolve beyond *Euphoria*?**

**'My *Euphoria* moodboards had Nan Goldin photos, Larry Clark film stills, Christina Ricci in *Buffalo '66*, and Instagrams of girls with winged liner.'**

I love the *Euphoria* aesthetic, so I bring some of that to the brand. Now there's this commercial aspect of our brand that, in order to survive and thrive, we obviously have to sell products. To do that, we have to sell products to mainstream Middle America. An interesting thing that is happening now is this delayed effect with mainstream make-up. I look around and see it has barely hit the real mainstream until now. I'm seeing so many rhinestones everywhere – Beyoncé concerts, Taylor Swift concerts. It's blowing up in the *real* mainstream, not just New York City and L.A., who have been on *Euphoria* make-up for a while. Our next mission is to show how we do everyday make-up. Another thing that is part of the *Euphoria* aesthetic is very lived-in skin, when your real skin shows through. So, we're going to lean into that with the complexion. We plan to branch out into all categories, thinking beyond *Euphoria* terms all the time; bridging the gap between fantasy make-up, fashion and editorial make-up, and everyday life.

**Traditionally, the runway dictated trends – even with make-up – and the role of cosmetics was for a luxury brand to have an accessible route to consumers. You've talked about the role of social media in both inspiring the *Euphoria* make-up, and being a way for you to engage and share with audiences online. Are you more influenced by that than fashion and beauty imagery created by brands?**

I'm super involved on TikTok, engaging with people there. The engagement and seeing how people are wearing Half Magic, and what they're asking for really excites me, because people don't hold back. It's not just an aesthetic thing; it's a category thing. 'We need this'; 'Give us a mascara'; 'Give us a skin tint.' And I'm like, 'I'm working on it!' I find that so interesting in terms of what I can build around this world of Half Magic. It's almost like a meta narrative.

**Are A24's other films and shows also an outlet for them to promote Half Magic? Is that a conversation you've had?**

Yes. It was kind of a mad dash to get everything set up and running, but now we're working on collaborations with other projects. For example, we did a *Priscilla* box for the Sofia Coppola movie. But this is how a collaboration works on A24's side: A24 has a very specific aesthetic. Half Magic is not sold on the A24 merch site, because we are a different company. We are a baby of A24, but we exist in our own hemisphere. We are moonlighting this concept of working collaboratively with A24 for movies they have coming out, having a little marketing moment. For *Priscilla*, it's very much a 'get the look' type thing and will be sold on A24's merch site and in Ulta. So, we're doing the dream of what I thought in the beginning: how we're going to utilize Half Magic in terms of A24 launches, and how we're going to partner with them. They're not just like, 'We're going to put our stamp on all the stuff', because they're very thoughtful. It doesn't work like that. We don't make a collection and put an A24 logo on it. That's not the vibe or the A24 way.

Courtesy of A24 Films

India Menuez, Grace Van Patten and Sydney Sweeney in David Robert Mitchell's *Under the Silver Lake*, 2018.

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1. *Moonlight* is a 2016 American coming-of-age drama film written and directed by Barry Jenkins, based on Tarell Alvin McCraney's unpublished semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. It was released as the first LGBTQ-themed mass-marketed feature film with an all-black cast and was, at the time of its release, the second-lowest-grossing film domestically (behind *The Hurt Locker*) to win the Oscar for Best Picture.

2. *Buffalo '66* is a 1998 American crime comedy-drama film written and directed by Vincent Gallo, starring Gallo, Christina Ricci, Ben Gazzara and Anjelica Huston. British band Wet Leg mention the film in their 2021 song 'Wet Dream', in which a character propositions the singer with 'Baby do you want to come home with me; I've got *Buffalo '66* on DVD'.

3. Half Magic general manager Michelle Liu worked for nearly a decade as Estée Lauder's executive director in New York, then as Senior Director at Kendo overseeing projects including Marc Jacobs Beauty and Fenty Beauty, before briefly returning to Estée Lauder as Vice President Global Marketing & Consumer Engagement, and then starting her own consultancy company, Butterfly Advisory.

# ‘The adrenaline carried me for over 30 years.’

**Alexandre de Betak looks back on a life producing monumental fashion shows, and forwards to a time when brands have dematerialized what they sell.**

**Interview by Thomas Lenthal**
**Portrait by Juergen Teller; creative partner Dovile Drizyte**

SHOW SPACE
Maille 1/2
SHOW SPACE 1/2
DIOR

When the teenage Alexandre de Betak set up shop in Paris in 1987, there wasn't a word to describe what he wanted to do. Today, 35 years later, terms like 'show producer' still barely begin to define the creator behind an astonishing body of work: Bureau Betak has produced 1,500 runway shows over more than three decades, for the likes of Dior, Fendi, Calvin Klein, John Galliano, Jacquemus, Michael Kors, Berluti, Victoria's Secret and many others. The 18-meter high mountain of blue delphiniums in the Louvre's courtyard for Raf Simons; Anthony Vaccarello's Saint Laurent shows within a stone's throw of the Eiffel Tower. In 2021, a majority stake in Bureau Betak was acquired by The Independents, the spectacularly well-funded PR and events group founded in 2017, which also comprises Karla Otto, K2, Qode, Lefty and Prodject, the agency that produces the Met Gala. Then, in June 2023, it was announced that Betak was stepping back from the business that bears his name (now run by co-CEOs Benedicte Fournier, Paco Raynal and Guillaume Troncy, and global head of design Simon Caillaud) to become Creative Chair, Head of Strategy for The Independents. His unofficial job description is to help identify talent and acquisitions, with a view to doubling the size of the group by 2025, reaching $700 million in annual revenue. But Betak's vision for The Independents isn't only defined by financial growth. As fashion, entertainment and events merge into one of the world's most influential art forms, Betak sees new responsibilities to the industry, to emerging talent, and to the planet. *System* sat down for a mile-a-minute conversation about chasing adrenaline, resisting categories, and why we all need to step back, before a leap into the unknown.

**'Paris in the 1980s attracted creative people. I was 12 when Mitterrand was elected, and I already had a photo lab in the bathroom at my mother's house.'**

**Thomas Lenthal: What year did you start out?**
**Alexandre de Betak:** In 1987, when I was 18. I started on my own, as Alexandre de Betak, and then launched Bureau Betak in 1990. In that era at the end of the 1980s, Paris felt very international; there was a lot of international creativity around.

**There's a brilliant book that's just come out about Jack Lang[1], where you can see his international ambitions at that time; this ambition with Mitterrand for Paris and France to be at an international level of excellence. The state wanted to raise the bar and launch major projects, and there was this new idea that, ultimately, the great servants of the state in the field of culture might not have to be French.**
I definitely felt it was more international. Not out of calculation, but because we had a period and a place that was so culturally interesting that it attracted creative people. I was twelve when Mitterrand was elected, and I already had a photo lab in the bathroom at my mother's house. I liked taking photos, and I was very serious about my work from a young age. But it was never an active decision of mine to do the job that I ended up doing – that job never had a name; it didn't exist. I started out as a photographer when I was 15, taking photos for the Berlitz Guides, those tiny, square-format Swiss travel guides. I did Chicago, Alaska, stuff like that. When I was sixteen, I was taking photos in Spain for newspapers and magazines like *Actuel*, *Globe*, *La Luna de Madrid*[2]. At 17, more magazine work came in, partly because I'd done a huge reportage on nightlife in Paris, which got me into all the best parties and clubs at the time. At 18, because I was in Paris and I thought it was classy to have a student card at the Sorbonne, I enrolled there, but at the same time I enrolled in Milan too because it was a fun place. A friend and I were also putting on a weekly night there called Paris Latino.

**And then there was the parade for the bicentennial of the French Revolution by Jean-Paul Goude[3] – that was really the quintessence of that period.**
At the age of 20, for Goude's parade in 1989, I was lucky enough to go on my little Vespa to see the rehearsals in the Bois de Boulogne, and I spent days watching everything I could. I watched the show on TV – because I sadly hadn't been invited – which was the pinnacle of envy for me. It wasn't a concert, opera, theatre, cinema; it was something new, something else. I wasn't into fashion at all, but I was into composition, like Man Ray and surrealist photography, and watching this show made me realize that you could do in life what I already loved doing in photographs: creating a frame. But using a billion other instruments that I hadn't even considered: movement, choreography, music, light, animals, clothes. I saw something that fascinated me and it made me want to have this emotion and adrenaline. It drew me away from photography towards this thing which didn't have a name.

**What did you do then?**
I set up an office. Nothing like a traditional press office. I was doing PR for the Sybilla[4] collection, but then I was doing artistic direction for the Spanish photographer Javier Vallhonrat; and there was a model agency in Tokyo, called L'Homme et la Femme, for whom I was doing some scouting, finding unusual faces. The owner of that agency was a collector of old Renault Alpines, so I'd bring Renaults over to Tokyo. I'd go to Madrid to see Sybilla and then go out at night; I'd take photos and then bring them to *City* magazine, which produced Madrid guides. I just did a bit of everything, and I refused to put a name on my office. In 1990, I opened a big office in Paris, on Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, above the Sybilla shop. I started doing the first Sybilla shows, which were in Milan, at the Osservatorio, the old place that Prada later used for their shows. Then we went on to Tokyo, Kyoto, Kobe, Osaka, Madrid…

**'You were given two hours, three white walls and a room, and depending on your budget, you were told whether you could put a logo on the back wall.'**

**What were the shows like at that time?**
Because I was Parisian, I was able to go and see the big shows at the time: Gaultier, Mugler and Azzedine. The creation of those shows was entirely in the hands of the designer, and the production of the shows entirely in the hands of the press offices – in-house, external agency, or a mixture of the two. The external producers were people like 2e Bureau and Catherine Miran, and the *créateurs* were the teams, like Jean Paul [Gaultier] with Franck [Chevalier] and Lionel [Vermeil] and the whole gang. At that time, in my eyes, the most creative things were always created in-house. The creators had both the means and the time. Perhaps they were less spectacular, but when something isn't as big, it means there's less money, and less money means less responsibility, more freedom. You can afford to be crazier. What I dreamed of doing was the art direction and the creation of all the communication tools: the photos, the ads, the fashion shows, the parties. I did a huge party when I was 20 for the opening of the Sybilla boutique on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And fashion designers that I liked or didn't like began to approach me, and I'd say to them: 'I don't mind getting together to do your show, but I have no desire to do a showroom.' And in a very short space of time, after opening this beautiful big office that I loved, I decided to leave for New York.

**At that time, there was a feeling in the industry that New York could become a really important place…**
As we've said, we used to think that Paris was very international. The reality is that in 1991, at the start of the Gulf War, all the Americans began to leave Paris: the models, the photographers, the fashion people, the make-up artists, the hairdressers, the stylists, from London, New York, Italy, everywhere. I had the very clear feeling that very quickly all of these people were no longer there.

**Do you think that's also due to the arrival of *Bazaar* in the US? That felt like a rather special moment.**
I think one goes with the other. I don't think they left for *Bazaar*, I think they left because of the war. I was at the Sybilla party on 15th March 1991 – I'm nuts when it comes to remembering certain dates – and one of the magazine headlines about it was that it was the first 'post-war party'. Then there was the economic crisis, which only lasted a short time in America, but started later in France and lasted longer. France was feeling down. New York, on the other hand… It was the beginning of grunge, the beginning of androgyny, and a trickle of minimalism which we – the Europeans – were starting to get into. When people in New York asked me: what do you do? I said straight out, 'I do fashion shows: I advise, do the design, the concept, the art direction, the production, the casting, everything.' I had my first clients at the same time: Ghost[5] in New York and Prada in Milan. And I did John Bartlett[6], which was a very interesting moment of homoerotica; it was hyper-liberal for America, very advanced and rather brilliant. I was soon doing Michael Kors; I was doing quite big things pretty quickly. Then came the launch of Miu Miu; I did the first Miu Miu show in New York, in 1995. It was that American dream of being able to arrive anywhere, at any age, at any time, and say: 'I'm doing this', and before they even ask you for your CV, they say, 'okay you're doing it.' Of course, there are good and bad sides to this. The bad sides lead to a Trump presidency, but there are good sides, too. People give you the chance to do what you want and if you do it well, you can keep doing it. That fascinated me

when I first arrived there, and that's why I stayed for a very long time. It was a bit pretentious: I was 22 years old and I was like, 'Yes, I do Prada and Bartlett.' But when I started Donna Karan, Michael Kors and things like that, people said 'Okay, fine', and I quickly found myself with a lot of big clients on my hands.

> **'For the smallest shows today, overall budget, we're talking half a million euros. That goes up to 15 million euros, which is 30 times more expensive.'**

**What was the catwalk format in those very first shows? What were you trying to do?**
It was the beginning of the standardization of American fashion shows, in Bryant Park, which I immediately reacted against. You were given two hours, three white walls and a room, and depending on your budget and how many people you had in production, you were told you could put a logo on the back wall, and put a green or red filter on your lights. You could play your own music, obviously, but it was very, very limited. One of the first shows where I managed to break out of that format was John Bartlett. John was an amusing man, and he said, 'What do you think about the logo?' and I said, 'Why don't we put a swinging hammock on the runway with you in it, the models walk underneath you, and at the end, you take off your hat, sit down and take your bow?' So that's what we did. The logo was John Bartlett himself in a hammock, but the audience didn't know it was him. The room was a bit dark, it was a summer show, the cast were super muscular guys, all oiled up. It was a show with no budget; I just threw pallets on the floor. The finale was a sort of pile-up of oiled flesh, 30 sublime beefcakes in their swimming trunks, the music rising, the light rising and John lifting his hat and waving. It was a roaring success. Once I'd broken out of the format, I started holding shows in weird places: like in the Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station, where the girls walked between the oysters, with Sandra Bernhard[7] talking nonsense about them as they walked.

**And you were all on your own in this approach? You didn't have any competition?**
There was KCD, a big, extremely respectable and talented press office, which did both PR and shows for clients; when I arrived, it was the end of [KCD founders] John Duka and Kezia Keeble, with a new team taking over. Steven Meisel was directing Anna Sui's debut fashion show. There was Marc Jacobs, who was starting to do grunge. He used a white runway; he just didn't care. Ralph [Lauren] just made the girls spin round. I was the one who started making them change the location, the format. Sometimes I put the photographers on the stage and made the girls come in from the street.

**And there was a standard budget?**
There was *no* budget! Spending on shows, on comms at even the biggest American luxury brands was not comparable to luxury in Europe; it was so much lower. The shows cost nothing! You rented a tent for three hours, you changed the colour of your runway and you put whatever money you wanted into your casting and your music. At the time I left Paris I had a huge, sublime office. When I arrived in New York, I lived in a friend's spare bedroom. I bought two trestles and a plank at the hardware store, sat on my suitcase, and made that my office. It was a huge step backward, financially, that I took in order to be where there were more possibilities, because people were open to listening to a little Parisian guy.

**How long did you stay in New York?**
Ten years at first, but I came and went. I was going to Prada and other shows in Milan, then I started Paris and London. My first big show in Paris was Hermès with Martin [Margiela]. It must have been 1996 or 1997, and very quickly I did Céline with Michael Kors. It's funny to think I did Hermès at the same time. And Dior with John [Galliano].

**What was your first show with John?**
The Versailles couture show in July 1999[8] with the parachute. For that show, I just worked with John on the casting twist – that I took some boys to the couture casting and passed them off as girls. My first official show for Dior was in January 2000; it was couture, with the tramps at the Petit Palais.

**How do you think the metrics of success have changed in your profession in the last 25 years?**
In a way, it's both totally different and exactly the same. It was quite simple to describe a buzz that can be measured by media coverage. When I started, it was the beginning of seeing fashion shows on TV. You had succeeded if it got a few seconds of coverage on the news. But when there's an emotion in the room, you can feel it straight away backstage. The models come back and they're excited, and the butterflies set in. Back then, the book of press cuttings would come in and it would be *this* big… Today, it's the same except digital impressions are measured in millions, tens of millions, hundreds of millions. It seems to me that Pharrell at Vuitton has surpassed the billion mark. An unimaginable figure. Not so long ago, the biggest brands I worked with were trying to reach a million on Facebook. Not even Instagram – one million on Facebook was a benchmark less than ten years ago. Now we're talking billions, one thousand times more. That's an eighth of the planet.

> **'Today, digital impressions are measured in the hundreds of millions. Pharrell's Vuitton show surpassed a billion. That's an eighth of the planet.'**

**It's difficult to take that as a benchmark today, because the appeal goes beyond the brand and the show. It's a billion people going to see Pharrell's thing.**
But more than 50% of brands are run by Pharrells. The person who stages the show doesn't necessarily make it bigger, rather they channel it, to get a result that is not only huge, but positive. I think real success happens when the public associates a memory and an emotion with a brand, and that experience serves as a foundation for the creation of the brand into the future. I've always wanted to invent an individual format for each house. With John, for example, his exit [onto the catwalk] is one of the fundamental elements of the language. Real success is about emotion; emotion is the necessary tool for memory. When you don't move people; you don't make an impression. But you have to make sure the message is there, too: Whose house are you in? Where are you? I arrived after John's sublime shows, with the trains, the Indians, the Marie-Antoinettes; they were some of the most beautiful spectacles I've ever seen in my life. But the reason he called me was that despite the incredible memories those shows created, they didn't help the brand. They didn't help people to project themselves, realistically, into today's world.

**It had nothing to do with the quality of the shows; it had everything to do with what he was doing in fashion.**
Exactly. As soon as it doesn't move people, it becomes unmemorable. Which fashion show do you remember well from the Covid times?

**I remember some very mediocre things, which I won't name, but which I remember vividly as just bad cinema.**
Yes, but fashion is more complicated than that, because there's a need for surprise, for subversion. Fashion is not theatre or opera. On 14th July, 1989, when Goude took the catwalk onto the street, it was an emotional, experiential, physical exchange. That's irreplaceable. The fake runway show, like we saw during Covid – meaning the real show but without an audience, and filmed more cleanly, with cameras everywhere – did not have the immediacy or the live feel or the emotion that that exact same show would have had with an audience present. At the same time, I really think that it's not necessary for everyone to be everywhere all the time. For half the people in fashion, it was hell to do all that travel. But I sincerely believe that the live aspect is a real issue: the human side, the human emotion helps enormously. Also, regularity becomes boring and puts people to sleep. Showing every six months, on the same day, in the same city, with the same audience and in the same format… Even if you change your decor, your cast and your music, after a while it becomes boring. Even if the show is extraordinary, moving and memorable every time, as those of McQueen and Galliano were, they become boring. So there have been times, before Covid, when people said, 'Okay, this season, I'm making a film, or a play, or a book.' Those films, plays, and books have never been as effective or even as memorable as the shows that came before and after, but they have served to revive interest.

**What does one of the very big shows cost these days?**
For fashion shows, there are two or three figures to keep in mind. There's the production part of a show. That's what we call the 'hard' part: the location, the set. Then there's the models. And the fashion, the collection. Where do you start and finish? And then you have all the hospitality and PR costs, the guests…

**Yes, but you don't deal with that.**
No, I don't deal with it, but I know what it's worth. For the smallest shows, overall budget, we're talking half a million euros. That goes up to, say, €15 million – 30 times more expensive. That's something that only exists in fashion.

**Well, there's cinema: American blockbusters cost $100 million and French films cost $5 million.**

Yes, but how many times have you had the same audience see both? In fashion, people will go from a €10 million show straight to one that's cost €100,000. That doesn't exist in the cinema. There are expensive films and cheap films, but aside from *The Blair Witch Project*, there's no cheap film that's going to have the same life. And the worst thing about the shows is that they're judged in the same way, by the same people. I've always wanted to help young designers because, creatively, it's much more stimulating to do something great for nothing. But at the same time, you're doing great stuff that costs a lot of money. For a very long time, we did Viktor&Rolf, Jacquemus, Vaccarello, Rodarte. It's extremely gratifying when you have Dior and Vuitton in a magazine, and Hussein Chalayan is on the cover. But what can sometimes seem so unfair is to have journalists complaining to you because it was too hot for them during the show, or too cold, or raining. You want to say to them, 'You do realize that you're at a €100,000 show, right? And that the one after is a €10 million show? It's not the same hotel. It's not the same comfort.' You don't even have to pay to attend. That doesn't exist in cinema. There's not one guy who's going to critique a low-budget film as if it were a blockbuster.

> **'The lack of means, the constraints force us to find solutions that are artistically and emotionally more effective than when you have a surplus of means.'**

**In a way, you're saying that a film's budget has to correspond to what the film sets out to do. And there are small budgets that manage to tell monumental stories in a very small way.**

I don't want to make problems for myself, but in most cases, in creative work, the lack of means, the constraints force us to find solutions that are artistically and emotionally more effective than when you have a surplus of means. Unfortunately, in most cases, the extra resources come with specifications that, in the end, are emotionally and creatively much less effective.

**When you handle the higher-end budgets, there's always a chance that it falls flat on its face. There's an extraordinary tension.**

You just keep your fingers crossed. That complete catastrophe almost never happens. Accidents, or things that don't work – that happens all the time. Serious things have happened, but not to us. We've had insects, rain…

**Have you ever said to yourself, I'd love to do the Super Bowl or the Oscars?**

Yes and no. Guy [Oseary], Madonna's manager, tells me every time I bump into him that I'm the only guy who turned down the Super Bowl with Madonna at any price. It's not that I didn't care, it's just that it was an unseemly amount of time for me to abandon my clients, my ongoing projects, including Dior. She's of a generation of talented people who need someone to be with them all the time on the preparation, for three or four weeks. I don't have the means to do that, but also, I don't need to: I design on paper, I brief and direct talent, I work with choreographers, lighting designers and dancers without being on their backs 24 hours a day. You couldn't do 25 shows in a three-week season otherwise, it's simply not possible! So I've had to turn down the Super Bowl, and lots of other huge concerts. Ironically, I did do the first fashion projects with celebrities from the entertainment world, starting with J.Lo more than 20 years ago. We did Beyoncé, we did Kanye, Gwen Stefani. We made the debuts, the concepts and launches of all the non-designer brands, the showbiz brands, Hollywood brands, singer brands, actor brands. It was a language I understood, that I might have wanted to develop more effectively in concerts. But fashion works at a pace so regular and so frantic that it never really leaves the opportunity to do anything else very seriously.

**You're known in the industry as a creative show *concepteur* and producer. But you've recently announced you're stopping all that to reinvent yourself, so what are you doing now?**

I'm privileged to have a great team. Some of the leaders in that team have been with me for more than 25 years, and all of them have been there for at least ten. It's thanks to this extraordinary team that I can calmly take this decision to hand over, and to withdraw from my daily life and my original profession. I've taken it further now, to withdraw completely from Bureau Betak, and to use my experience and my knowledge and my influence elsewhere.

**How many people are there at Bureau Betak today?**

About 70. It seems like a big number, but compared to the number of shows we do all over the world, it's a very small team. We've always tried to stay small, like a small car that goes very fast and is easy to handle. In September 2021, we announced that we had sold the majority of Bureau Betak to The Independents, a group set up by Olivier and Isabelle Chouvet, and then I became a partner and started to distance myself somewhat from the day-to-day business. I'm basically a creative person, but I learned about management and business on the job, because I was on my own from when I was 18 all the way up until two years ago, when I sold my majority shareholding. I'd been thinking for a very long time about how to prepare the handover, to train people how we do Betak, and how we approach a brief.

**Is it an idea of quality, or a particular ambition for something?**

It's a mixture of approaches, but there are things that come up all the time. One of the primary ones is the marriage of what we call the 'cueing' of space and time, of music and light; the synchronization of all the elements. The way you synchronize your music with your action, your lighting, your effects, your whatever, means that you can manipulate attention in one direction or another. That's one of the first hallmarks of Bureau Betak: the precision and the way you use the elements and the means. The high and the low. Ultra-juxtaposition is part of the language here, as well as a kind of retro-futurism. A kind of theatricality through synchronicity. Celebrating the past, to pay homage to previous collections and previous eras. At Rodarte, when I started out, they didn't have a penny to their name and I said that the next show would always be a continuation of the previous one, using the same elements. I put a few fluorescent tubes on a metal base in New York, and I wrapped a backdrop with aluminium foil. Ten years later, we had ten times more fluorescent tubes, we had ten times more aluminium foil. Now all the Rodarte fashion shows have had these recycled elements: fluorescent hay bales, fluorescent towers. What I call culture at Bureau Betak is always a bit of history, a piece of the past.

> **'I always wanted to invent an individual format for each house's shows. With Galliano, his exit onto the catwalk became a fundamental element of Dior.'**

**Tell me more about The Independents, your new venture.**

The Independents group was set up by the Chouvets from their production company in China. They'd acquired Karla Otto a few years earlier, plus Lefty[9], and now a lot more. I came onboard in 2021, helping them to bring in other talent. The first to join after I arrived was Prodject, which is a rival company from New York, that produces the Met Gala, the LACMA Gala in LA; big cultural and fashion events. At The Independents, my role is Creative Chair, Head of Strategy, to help identify talent that can be complementary to the group's mission, which is to help luxury brands communicate in a broad way. So I help to identify talent that is already very recognized, that will sell, or very young talent that we could incubate and help to develop in the business. We are lucky in that my partners have major financing capacity that inspires immense confidence from external investors to put resources on the table.

**Can you tell us where specifically you're looking for that talent?**

All of the creative professions that are similar or parallel to my own former activity, i.e. technology, lighting, robotics, kinetics, programming, web – all the technological elements, the traditional creative and scenic elements. Beyond that, talents in design, whether it's interior design, scenographic design, or design in general. And then, even further afield, talents in applying ecological technologies and sustainability, which opens things up a bit more. And PR communication, digital communication, strategy, talent representation. It's very broad.

**You could open a school!**

That isn't a topic of discussion with The Independents, but it is for me personally. I've always dreamt of having an official technological and artistic residency at Bureau Betak. We've always been so lucky with extraordinary interns, but we've never done it. The associations and acquisitions to which I'll be contributing by helping with research and selection – be it talking about communication in the very broadest sense, or production, creativity, design, research and so on – these are the same areas in incubation at a much younger and broader level. We invite them to participate in brainstorming and creation at Bureau Betak, for fashion shows, events, exhibitions. We're building a great group of successful companies, with great talent that we'll help to develop. Although I was a creative when I started out and always will be, in the depths of my soul, I wasn't too bad at business and management. But that was always intuitive; I never went to school, I didn't learn anything. I started working before I was even 17 and I've based my whole life on intuition. Most of that intuition has served creativity, but the other part has served management and therefore business, or at least entrepreneurship. I'm just one of many examples of a self-made man. But the interesting part of being self-made is not the glory of coming from nowhere – I don't come from nowhere, I grew up in Paris, in a fantastic cultural and political milieu. No, the interesting thing is that I think a huge part of my creativity has come from my freedom to think, which came partly from not having studied. I didn't learn how to do things or how to follow rules. I invented a job; I didn't even have a name for it for a very long time. I think this freedom of spirit is priceless. When I started out, I never drew up a business plan or a project plan, but things were growing, we were making big numbers. And, to come back to my role in the Group, I'm extremely lucky to have found partners who are brilliant strategists. Olivier is a man who has tremendous knowledge, technical skills and accuracy, which enables him to inspire investors to bring in hundreds of millions of euros for businesses that, just a few years ago, didn't exist. In September 2021, we announced the approximate value of Bureau Betak, because I sensed that the rumours that were circulating from quite a few financial sources had already revealed it, and it got back to me that a lot of people, particularly in finance, fell off their chairs: a company that makes catwalk shows is worth almost €100 million? That's just insane. Since then, it's generated a lot of excitement and interest, thanks to my partners.

**Is the vision with The Independents that it should be a one-stop shop for show production?**

You could say it's a one-stop shop, although that's not exactly the case, because association or incubation also generates things that are not directly saleable. The interesting part of growing a group through acquisitions or associations is that putting complementary talents together means everything and nothing at the same time. You and I, who have a few decades of experience in parallel professions and in the same worlds, we're comparable, we're on a similar level. But people who are 20 or 30 years old, who have just started a business like yours or mine, with extraordinary talent but a completely different vision and very little experience – for me, they're comparable too. We can give ourselves the means to be able to brainstorm together. When you're an entrepreneur, when you've got your nose to the grindstone, you never have that time, because your duty is to get your ship moving, to support your family in the broadest sense – your family, all the families of the people who work for you. That's your first duty, your indisputable duty – to move forward. In a world like ours, which moves so fast, to move forward means, effectively, no time to do anything else, and not giving yourself the right to take that time to do something else, because you have a duty. I decided to take a step back, at a time when everything was going well, to give myself the opportunity to better analyse the situation in the fields I know, to find ways to develop which are viable economically, morally, politically, ecologically, even socially, and which I believe are a necessity for the evolution of brands in the near future. For a long time now, I've had a level of respectability and of power; quite simply I can call major executives who are my clients, and major talents who are my colleagues in the media, in luxury, on big campaigns, and we can sit down and talk shop. There is a limit to what we can say to each other when we each have our own companies and we have to defend our interests, but it's a group. The success of some makes the success of others, and we have common interests, including a common economic interest that really helps to put everything on the table. I don't want to be vulgar, but the extremely privileged contacts that I have with the great designers, the great luxury houses, the CEOs of those houses are, I think, relationships of mutual respect and trust, and I have even more trusting relationships with these people now than when I was selling them shows.

**Does the new knowledge that you're acquiring by being part of this group, through free and privileged conversation, help you to sell more things to your clients?**

No, I'm not the salesman. That's a question we haven't resolved, to be honest with you. But the fact that this group is growing with complementary talent means that it'll naturally offer more services to its customers. And from the inside I'm going to be contributing to a creative and strategic reflection, with all these other talents, to find and put the evolution of our ideas on the table.

**'Madonna's manager tells me every time I bump into him that I'm the only guy who turned down the Super Bowl with Madonna at any price.'**

**'When we started the cruise shows and all this travel stuff, for me the obvious solution was that we should also be UNESCO's biggest contributors.'**

**What is it about today's industry that makes you feel there's a need for deeper thinking?**

I think that the speed of evolution, particularly through technology and growth, means that we are now effectively reaching a worldwide transition in luxury, consumption, and fashion. And the future generations of consumers, of people who buy luxury and fashion, the very foundation of those industries are rapidly entering a new era. Communication today is almost more important than the product. Today, in reality, we don't give a damn about the consumer. There aren't one billion Vuitton consumers, but there are one billion people interested in Vuitton. I think that's a generational transition. There's going to be a moment when something will click or, unfortunately, with the ecological degeneration of the world, that the social tension will clash. I think we all believe that to some degree. We don't think there will be a particular day when it happens, but it will happen: a transition that is going to happen faster than all the previous transitions and evolutions in the world. This might sound hypocritical for someone who has spent his whole life helping to promote and sell luxury products that are neither needed nor useful, but I'm delighted that this turning point is coming. I'm not telling my customers that they should stop manufacturing. The big luxury brands that we work with have achieved so much power that they are no longer just fashion brands, but cultural transmitters. As soon as we accept that – that these brands have immense power to influence all populations, not just their customers, we can use this power to make an ecological improvement. I'm also certain that brands can start to imagine dematerializing what they sell, because they have so much power, they could sell you anything. You were talking about schools earlier, and I think that the big groups today – beyond the luxury products that we already know – are already moving into hospitality, and beyond that, they can target well-being, and well-being is a word that means everything and nothing today. Beyond well-being, we could start talking about education, we could talk about culture…

**We now see that cultural impact with art foundations, which are capable of putting on better exhibitions than museums because they have the means.**

The world of luxury and fashion that we're talking about could really help change habits in significant ways. It could help to change, obviously, polluting consumption, whether from fashion or from other sources, because fashion is not the worst of them. In figures, the worst polluters, well before fashion, are oil and meat. But neither oil nor meat have the power to influence in the same way as fashion. In my opinion, fashion and luxury are the most influential forces in the world today, undoubtedly more so than music, art or Hollywood. Fashion and luxury have the power to help bring about a positive revolution. I think the leading luxury houses could sell us anything: education, food, anything. Tomorrow, you could absolutely be eating Dior or Saint Laurent. In fact, it's already starting to happen.

**I thought that 20 years ago; that Cartier could start by saving panthers.**

It's amazing that it hasn't been done, and it's not too late for it to start. LVMH and I were already talking about it years ago.

**They could have single-handedly removed all the plastic from the oceans.**

Exactly. 20 years ago I was proposing that they join forces with UNESCO. When we started the cruise shows and all this travel stuff, for me the immediate, obvious solution was that we should also be UNESCO's biggest contributors, and that UNESCO could immediately benefit from the full contribution of the big groups and companies, so that every time we traded, we'd contribute to saving something like the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. In my job, you go to extraordinary places on the planet, exploit them for commercial purposes for people who have the means, but you could also save them for eternity, knowing that UNESCO doesn't have a penny. My role today is that I'd like to contribute as creatively and intuitively as ever, with the added bonus of having partners who can translate these ideas and creations into reality; who can make this group grow and make others invest in it; to contribute to bringing talent and companies and people who can, by complementing each other, help us think of solutions for the future. When I had my nose to the grindstone, I didn't take the time to think like this. Neither did my team, or the teams of all the companies, when they were hard at work – that is to say, always. They don't have the possibility of taking a step back. I'm interested in incubating people with experience like mine – people who have done communications, advertising, images, tech, all these parallel and complementary things at a certain level of innovation. If we all give ourselves the time and the distance, we can reflect on things that no one has made the time or space to think about before.

**What do you see as the future of the fashion catwalk and the fashion industry as a whole?**
There's the immediate future and the very long-term future. The future of the catwalk, we saw with Covid: we said we'd change everything, and we haven't changed anything at all. For the time being, I think we're on a roll that's not likely to stop. Quite the opposite, in fact, because the catwalk, in the broadest sense – the physical communication experiences that are catwalks, events, exhibitions – are the most effective communication tools, and their effectiveness is growing all the time. Unfortunately, the traditional press is shrinking. Traditional advertising is shrinking, and all those budgets are going into runway shows, events and so on, because those means of communication are growing all the time. I don't think this trend is going to stop at all. In perhaps a very short time, we'll have gone so far that everyone will be fed up again and, one by one… will it be Dior or Chanel? Saint Laurent, Balenciaga or Vuitton? It doesn't matter who's first, but someone will break this rhythm and repetitiveness, in favour of something else, only to come back to it again, no doubt. This growth is ultra-efficient, and it's not going to stop. There's also the beginning of a turning point, though it hasn't really got off the ground yet, with a new generation of customers who look at the problem that luxury brands can cause morally and ecologically in a very different way. And there are obviously new emerging markets that aren't completely in that equation yet. But one day, this new generation is going to say 'no, this isn't for us anymore – we don't need a new bag or shoes.' At some point they're not going to buy eight or sixteen handbags anymore. We have to help our clients to grow by declaring their negative impact on the world. It's starting now, already, and I'm convinced that we can do it through technology, culture, education and dematerialization. In a relatively short space of time, they'll be able to start making just as much money, selling new things that they've never made before, that not only have no negative impact, but even a kind of virtue. I dream that all of our professions, of communication and influence through luxury brands, can serve the planet positively.

**Lastly, why do you think the big groups don't incorporate the kind of thing that you or I do – show production or art direction – into their own structure?**
I don't know why they don't do it, or why they haven't tried to do it. But I think that to be able to renew your creativity, to keep your impartiality, you need your independence. If Bureau Betak had been part of the x or y group, even if we had been given total freedom, we probably wouldn't have had the same freedom of mind and impartiality. First, we wouldn't have given ourselves the rights that we have given ourselves. Second, we wouldn't have the experience and knowledge that you can acquire by working for a variety of clients, because the day you join x, you don't go to y anymore. Look at the type of talent that the groups need – all this talent that gravitates around luxury brands, whether it's photographers, directors, advertisers – it's in their interests to remain independent from luxury brands.

**Do you think they'd let you back at Bureau Betak?**
I don't think so! But the adrenaline was amazing – it carried me for over 30 years.

**Don't you miss it?**
Yes, of course. There are other jobs that need as much adrenaline, but maybe not in fashion. I've done more than 1,500 shows over more than 30 years. A lot of things happened. And now I've been lucky enough to sell big, which has given me the means to take this step back. The adrenaline… Of course, it's lacking in my life now. I still haven't thought about what could replace it.

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1. Jack Lang served as Minister of Culture in France under President François Mitterrand between 1981 and 1993. His 450-page book *Lignes de Vie*, published in 2023, chronicles this period. Widely recognized as a key cultural figure in France, Lang created the Fête de la Musique in 1982, and oversaw the construction and maintenance of great works in Paris including the Grand Louvre, Bastille Opera House and National Library, giving a new impetus to contemporary architecture in France.

2. *La Luna de Madrid* was an avant-garde magazine published in Madrid from 1983 to 1988 during the Movida Madrileña: a countercultural movement that took place during the Spanish transition to democracy after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. Pedro Almodóvar reflected those years in his films *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*; *Laberinto de pasiones*, and *What Have I Done to Deserve this?*

3. For the commemorative ceremonies of the bicentenary of the French Revolution on 14 July 1989, Jack Lang entrusted Jean-Paul Goude with the creative direction of the evening parade. More than 6,000 artists and extras participated in the 'great parade of countries', which was broadcast worldwide. Goude asked Azzedine Alaïa to collaborate with him for the parade costumes.

4. Sybilla Sorondo is an American fashion designer whose career started as an apprentice cutter and seamstress for Yves Saint Laurent in 1980. In 1985, she presented her own collections in Milan, Paris, New York, and opened her first boutique in Madrid two years later.

5. Ghost is a London fashion label founded in 1984 by Tanya Sarne and Katherine Hamnett. They called the label 'Ghost' after Sarne's business methodology, which was to employ a team of in-house designers who would create, or 'ghostwrite' the collections that would be linked to her name, under her supervision. Sarne's memoir *Free Spirit* was published in 2023.

6. John Bartlett is an American fashion designer who launched his eponymous brand in 1991 with a menswear capsule collection. In 1997 he simultaneously won the CFDA's Best Newcomer in Menswear and Best Menswear Designer Awards. He introduced womenswear in 1998, and closed his brand in the mid-2010s.

7. Sandra Bernhard is an American stand-up comedian. In the 1990s, she played a key role in the hit series *Roseanne* and was one of the first actresses to portray an openly bisexual recurring character on American television. Once upon a time, it was rumoured she was Madonna's lover.

8. The Dior Fall 1999 Couture show was held at the Orangeries in Versailles and designed by John Galliano. Hamish Bowles reported at the time that the collection was deeply inspired by The Matrix, Gainsborough in Persia, and Vishnu Knights. Galliano said, 'The dresses are evil, evil. But you have to have the Romantic – they die for that, my ladies.' After the show, Cathy Horyn wrote, 'One would have to wonder whether Mr. Arnault had made a deal with the devil.'

9. Lefty is a Paris-based premium influencer marketing firm whose clients include Louis Vuitton, Celine, and Acne Studios, among others. According to the company, it enables 'brands to discover, manage and measure collaborations with social-media influencers across TikTok, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram', predominantly through its digital platform.

Show space

# ‘The audience doesn’t lie.’

## Show producer extraordinaire Etienne Russo on the changing demands of the fashion spectacle.

**Interview by Thomas Lenthal**
**Portrait by Juergen Teller; creative partner Dovile Drizyte**

The fashion show as we know it today would hardly exist without the hand of Belgian producer extraordinaire, Etienne Russo. Having started his freewheeling career in the late 1970s, modelling for Kansai Yamamoto in Japan and then art directing a Brussels club, he fell into producing fashion shows through his involvement with the Antwerp Six – producing his first Dries Van Noten show in 1991, and every single one since. From humble beginnings as a player in a small world to being instrumental in the development of today's larger-than-life industry, Russo's production house, villa eugénie, has been developing what we've come to understand as the fashion show in real time. Back in the 1990s, a couture show meant sitting down in a Parisian *hôtel particulier* amongst a couple of hundred wealthy women, watching models walk against a no-fuss backdrop of an ornate room with only flowers as decoration. Fast-forward to the Grand Palais reopening in the mid-2000s and a blossoming partnership between Russo and Karl Lagerfeld coalesced. With a deep understanding of the word 'grand' and the venue's capacious potential, the pair embarked on a journey that cemented the modern world of Chanel in everybody's mind: the supermarket show, the casino, the giant ice cube, the rocket, the waterfall, the beach, the ski village – big visual statements made for the digital age. With the seamless merging of fashion and entertainment, and the increasing scale and complexity of the work he produces, it's not farfetched to imagine Russo pivoting to produce a Super Bowl halftime show or stage the Olympics ceremony. But before any of that happens, Russo sat down with *System* to discuss the past, present and future of creating shows that engage all five senses.

> **'The first ever show I produced was Dries, in Paris. I was so terrified I hid in the toilets. Dries was going crazy looking for me: 'Where is Etienne?!''**

**Thomas Lenthal: Very simply, how would you describe what it is you do?**
**Etienne Russo:** It has never had a name because it is not an old profession. Sometimes it is scenography, sometimes choreography; it has never been defined. And now we have to add a bit of strategy. It is a job in constant evolution. It's like: you stay still, you die.

**But if you are sat at a dinner party, and someone asks you what you do, what do you tell them?**
I usually try to change the subject! [Laughs] I haven't found a way to explain it in a short way.

**Then let's start from the beginning! You were in Brussels, and you were modelling – how did that lead to you working in fashion?**
I was in the right place at the right time. My modelling career allowed me to travel. I went to New York when it was really booming, just before the mid-'80s, and I decided to live in Tokyo, where you saw Caucasian people so rarely that when you did, you'd wave, like, 'You are not alone!' When I came back to Brussels, I started working in a club, Le Mirano, spread across two floors in what had been a 1930s cinema. There was an interaction with Paris and fashion there; Jean Paul Gaultier did a show there, and the Antwerp Six, who weren't labelled that at the time, had just come out. I started doing pictures with Walter Van Beirendonck, and then with Dries [Van Noten]. And in my fifth year at the club, I asked them to do an installation. I was already experimenting with mixing elements to create an experience, and one day in late 1990, Dries called me and said: 'I'm going do my first show in Paris, do you want to do it?' It was a serious opportunity, but I was scared. I had seen a few shows, but it was not the same as being in my club, which was like a laboratory. On the day of the show, I was hiding, terrified in the toilets. Dries was going crazy looking for me: 'Where is Etienne?! Where is Etienne?!' I couldn't move for 20 minutes. That was my first show in Paris, in the basement of the Hotel Saint James Albany. We put real grass on the catwalk. But being in the basement without the right light, it started turning brownish, so we had to airbrush it. We were a small team and everyone was doing everything. I was installing the show and selling the next day: one client in the morning, another in the afternoon, and then I'd cook for a client in the evening. Back then I would come to visit Paris for four or five days, see maybe 60 or 70 venues and select 20. And still, when you see Dries, he's never lost that, he'll never show in a place if he doesn't feel a good reason for it. So, nowadays when you have only one venue to present that will suit all his needs, it is a miracle.

**You were inventing how it should it be done. The first shows had models holding up a number, then there was the Hotel Intercontinental, then the tents at the Louvre, and then people began trying to turn the shows into a more interesting experience. It was really in the late 1980s, before the internet, that shows started to become exciting to look at. You belong to a generation that created what shows have become.**
Really? I think of Kenzo and Kansai Yamamoto. As a model, I remember being on stage in Tokyo for Yamamoto. There were more than 350 people on stage, for two back-to-back shows in front of 12,000 people in a sumo arena with lots of drummers – so much going on! I like to compare the Belgians to the Japanese – the Belgians were to the '90s what the Japanese were to the '70s and '80s, like with Margiela changing all the proportions. Back then, I was an underdog. I was living in Brussels, where I was born, and coming to Paris to do my thing for the Belgians.

**Were you taking care of the Margiela shows?**
Not at the beginning, only when he started doing Hermès. After Dries, there were other designers, but it was only in 1998 when I started working with non-Belgian brands. And then there was this ultra-polished luxury, when Tom Ford arrived with his sort of porno chic…

> **'For Hermès, we have to pay even more attention to detail; the show construction has to look like it'll last forever, to convey the sense of craftsmanship.'**

**What was your inspiration back then?**
Everything. The street, people, a magazine, a lot of art. I would buy tonnes of books. I had the time to go through books and put little post-its in them, without knowing what I would do with the ideas. My perception of contemporary art really changed at the end of the 1990s, when I met a gallery owner in Florence who started introducing me to the work of artists I didn't know; through that, I started collaborating with artists and collecting art and going to every art fair that I could. Buying a book is one thing, but going to exhibitions, going to Venice, you create a relationship with the gallerists, sometimes more than with the actual artists. A few became very good friends.

**Do you take inspiration from other fashion shows that you see taking place?**
No, never. I try to not look at what else is happening. Except maybe McQueen, because that guy was brilliant, a genius. And Margiela, but I ended up working for him. Margiela and McQueen were at the same level, which is why one quit and the other one quit in a different way. With McQueen, you watch the shows ten times and you say, 'Oh my god.' With Martin's shows it was more like, 'Why did no one ever think of that before?' Lee was provocative; he had to say what he felt. I could have seen him doing an opera or a movie; it just happened that fashion was a form of expression that he had mastered.

**Tell me about the Chanel by Karl shows you were involved in. The mountain, the supermarket, the rocket…**
When Chanel shows moved to the Grand Palais, Karl found he had to express himself differently and that it took time. Sometimes he would be briefing us on a future idea while we were still working on the previous show.
**It was taking things to a different scale, and then everyone started going bigger. It triggered this new movement.**
LVMH and Kering were pushing each other, and acquiring brands, and so they had to make themselves stand out from the other, and make a big statement. And then Instagram arrived, and you were no longer looking at lighting or at a set, you were looking at it all through a phone. So, with all that happening, we had to think very differently; the evolution of the market and the evolution of technology were pushing us in a direction we'd never thought about before.

**It's a captivating thing when a good show is put together – you can feel it. But I've yet to see a video of a show that makes it as interesting on the screen. It becomes purely factual – just dresses.**
I agree, but we are trying to change that. Hermès asked us, 'What do we give to the people who are not in the room?' If I think of the last Hugo Boss show we did in Milan, I said I wanted it to be approached like a movie; I don't want it to be centred all the time, so if there is something, just move the camera, go there. We want the spectator who isn't there to feel like they are there. To give them a cinematic experience. When we did a quick debrief with the CEO of Hugo Boss, two days ago, he told me that 20 million people watched the show. So these people need to feel like they're getting something special, not just watching from afar.

**What would you say are the metrics of success today for the work that you deliver to clients, compared to 20 years ago? Is it the client coming back and saying 'I had 300 million likes'?**
Well, that helps! But you feel it there in the moment; you know if it is good or not. There is a kind of electricity that builds up in the room, so that when the show finishes or is about to finish,

you feel the way it has been received. The audience generally doesn't lie; the intensity of the applause. And then – this came with the internet – the client shows you on a kind of dashboard how many people watched online, and how that compares to the previous show, after 48 hours, after one week. When you hear that millions of people are watching, that motivates you to say 'How do I surprise them next time?'

**Is the only moment when you can truly enjoy a show in hindsight – ten years later or a day later – or do you continue to obsess over the imperfections?**
I am harder on myself than any client. I only see what didn't work and what I will do better next time. Even if you get a very good response, you have your own personal judgement on the entire production, the execution, the micro details. But you have to balance dissatisfaction with the voice that says 'It's okay'.

> **'I'm harder on myself than any client is. I only ever see what doesn't work, and even when the response is great, I have my own personal judgement.'**

**Do you feel more pressure now, with budgets bigger than ever? For some of the brands you work with, they want to do the most impressive show of the season, and money is not an issue…**
I have to put you straight there; money *is* an issue. It always has been, and it always will be. But the scale of the people you reach has changed. If you think in terms of how advertising used to be, it was about how much you spend per person. A global company that wants to grow needs to talk to all those people. Before, the information was relayed by the press and filtered by whoever was at the show; *Vogue*, for example, was decisive about what would and would not work for the next seasons. And then suddenly we had bloggers, and then influencers and the new media. But who is it that makes all of this business work?

**The one who buys the bag at the end of the chain.**
Exactly. And this person has now started to receive information directly, in real time. The moment it is given to the press, they get it, too. So this grows the capacity of a show, and you don't talk to 600 people in the same way you would to 1,800. Plus, if a show was just about the moment, I don't think productions would be so big. But a show is a tool for months afterwards.

**More than months, years; it becomes part of the history of the brand.**
Yes, it is image-building. There will be TikToks, Instagram clips, they have to film in different ways for all the different platforms. Before, you just did a quick edit for the resee in the showroom. Then a week later, you'd deliver the film. Now you see the digital in real time, and a team works until late after the show to distribute the content on different channels and platforms.

**And to reach those audiences, brands are prepared to spend a certain amount of money. I mean, seen from the outside, Pharrell's debut show for Vuitton felt like a completely different paradigm. It expanded the horizons of a fashion brand using people who are not part of the fashion culture; a combination of fashion and entertainment.**
I love it. Fashion-tainment: the fashion statement and then the question of how to embrace the audience and give them a wonderful moment. Between those points, there is so much you can do. When you grow your audience, you understand that there are people who, with all due respect, are less fashion-educated. And there are still those people who are 100 percent in that field. You want everyone to understand but you don't want the purist in the front row to feel a downgrading in quality.

**It is like the Golden Age of Hollywood, taking sophistication to millions of people without dumbing it down. It is true that fashion isn't dumbing itself down in these shows.**
Of course! The designers still have their message to deliver; we cannot just give entertainment. Pharrell did a lot of collabs before – Chanel, Moncler, Adidas – so this was not his first attempt at fashion. And he was always dressing with fashion attitude. Before, you needed to be a designer and your talent would be recognized. Now you need to be a public figure, you need to be a good designer, you need to show up in the office in the morning and you need to know about marketing.

**Pharrell is a producer, to me. And that is his genius.**
We had worked together at Moncler, so we knew each other a bit. He cultivates gratefulness and giving back. He said, 'I want to give back to Paris.' He said, 'You people, the city, everyone has given me this.' The humility in that guy is something I have rarely seen in this business.

**Also this season, Dior Men's was maybe as impressive as Pont Neuf; totally different, but just as impressive. The impact was incredible; it was touching to see that perfect little machine working so neatly.**[1]
In the end, Kim Jones chose the opposite route to Pharrell; so opposite that there was no comparison. For me, it was an art installation. The checkerboard. His ideas are very clear, he is fast and super well-organized, and he has a wonderful British sense of humour. He is so, so fast in his head; you show him things and he knows, instantly, no hesitation. I would say it took four months to think it all through and get it right. And there was no rehearsal with the system before we got there. It had to be built in situ. All problems had to be solved on the spot. It took a bit longer than eight days to build. And on top of that, you have to take care of the wellbeing of the models. They were inside a box. At some point, the box has to close and we have to make sure no one has a panic attack. When I look at performances and the production that goes behind them, I always think that so many things could go wrong. If any part of this house of cards goes bottoms up, it will all fall down and be a major catastrophe in real time. And it does happen. Of course. And this is where you cannot lose your cool. For me the most important part of this job is reacting fast, you have to be like a chameleon. Technology pushes boundaries but there are moments where technology fails, too. Basically, my thinking is always 'worst case scenario, worst case scenario, worst case scenario.' In Milan last week, we worked with Camera Della Moda on The Green Carpet Fashion Awards and you meet people who work in the opera… It's a different world. They think at another speed, they rehearse for six months. We arrive and in three days we put the show together.

**Do you have your eyes on things like the Super Bowl halftime performance?**
Yes, of course, like the Olympics, or working on a movie. There's a moment when your ego thinks for you, and it sees you like a king of a little kingdom. Then maturity comes along and you say, 'OK, why do I put all my energy into this? Because there are people who have been trusting me for so many years who I can't ever let down.' Then you say another thing, 'There are people better than you at this; you are not going to reinvent the wheel.'

> **'Specialists are amazing, but they only master one thing. Like a doctor, I want to be the best generalist who sends you to the best specialists.'**

**Your work is done on a case-by-case basis, but how does the dialogue play out between yourself and the creative direction? It must be different every time.**
I would say there are three scenarios. In one, we are executive producers. There are very few shows like that, but we do them. Miu Miu is like that. Chanel, too, even if we do a bit more, they tell us what they want. Then, in the opposite scenario, there are clients like Moncler who give you a brief and they want it all from you. And in between, there are the ones I love the most, a kind of ping-pong, a dialogue. Alber Elbaz was like that. I have that with Daniel Roseberry and with Maximilian [Davis] at Ferragamo. A back and forth. Dries is about prints, fabrics, you know – he'll try to make you understand where he is going. Hermès is a brief; we come back with three serious concepts that are 85% finalized proposals and there is a dialogue. Hugo Boss trusts us to build an image strategy based on the collections. Each scenario is interesting. We have the luxury of having too much demand compared to what we can deliver, so we can be selective. We really love young designers with a new perspective on fashion. We did the second show for this very talented Belgian designer called Marie Adam-Leenaerdt[2] and it feels like we are starting the Dries years again with a modest budget.

**So you do those shows pro bono?**
Yes. Incubating talent. You know, sometimes when a request comes, we don't have the capacity at that moment to deliver to the level required. Many years ago, Louis Vuitton was one of them. I wouldn't have been able to do the work to the right level back then, but I got it back through Pharrell. If you develop a good connection with people, it endures. Véronique Nichanian at Hermès is someone I have known for 25 years, since 1998. And Alber, too. Once I was invited by a friend to their house in Saint Tropez. I went to Place des Lices on a Saturday morning and from a distance, I saw the *brocanteurs*[3] there and I spotted a beautiful miniature staircase. I bought it and said, 'This is for Alber, but I have no clue why.' I come back to Paris and we have our first meeting, and I say, 'Oh Alber, I have a little something for you.' He unpacked it, put it on the table, said nothing, walked around it, then suddenly said, 'This is the show!' And so we built that staircase larger than life and it was the show. That special connection with

## ‘I am a bit sad about becoming so old. If I could carry on until 2060, the changes that we’ll see in the next decades are huge. I’m going to miss all that.’

people means you can take risks. Dries – I mean, I would not be here without him. I have a special affection for this man. It is platonic, but I have to fall in love.

**How many people now work at villa eugénie on a constant basis?**
There are people on the payroll in Belgium, Paris and Italy. Beyond them, there is a pool of people that we work with, between 120 and 150 altogether, including the United States. I know everyone: the ones bringing the power generators, the ones who do the cleaning. You need to give attention, respect, and encouragement to everyone. You know, if you have a beautiful set but the toilets are not clean... *Everyone* counts.

**Tell me about Moncler.**
We were doing pro bono for Thom Browne in New York, at the very, very beginning of his career. Thom Browne was assigned to do Moncler’s Gamme Bleu line – at the time it was Gamme Bleu and Gamme Rouge.[4] Gamme Bleu was in Milan and Gamme Rouge was in Paris by Giambattista Valli. So, with Remo Ruffini we started to present Moncler Grenoble, rooted in the core of the brand, the Olympics, the technical stuff. Remo didn’t want a fashion show, and I knew that the very first presentation Remo did in Italy was 40 to 50 guys in a line.[5] It was just an installation. So, we started from that, and did something different every season where we could take people on a journey with *tableaux vivant*. For one show on February 14th, we had couples – boy-boy, girl-girl, and boy-girl – coming out of a huge chocolate box designed as a heart, and at the end the couple at the front made out on a wedding cake. The soundtrack was kitsch love songs and the last one was ‘Ti Amo’ and people started singing along, like a huge karaoke. You asked about measuring success… Since then, Remo and I are like family, not just friends. So, when Genius arrived, my first question to him was, why change the system? We have Gamme Rouge in Paris, Gamme Bleu in Milan and Grenoble in New York. He said he was bored, and he wanted a change, but couldn’t explain why or how. Rethinking the whole system, we came up with the nine designers. We ended up in London, 15,000 people.[6] It was big: 20,000 square metres and he wanted it to cover not only pure fashion but also lifestyle, which is why Jay-Z came along and Adidas and Pharrell. And now, again, I feel that he is starting to look for something new.

**I know you worked for Hermès, and something very interesting to me about Hermès is that they just do the opposite to the other clients.**
Indeed. It is not a house like any other. I think they have 18 *métiers*, and fashion is just one of them. At Hermès, we have to pay even more attention to detail; the construction has to look like it will last forever, to convey the essence of the craftsmanship they have.

**Craftsman-chic.**
Yes, we like that! There is no notion of ‘spectacular’ at Hermès, only quality. You have to feel an ease, a way of not shouting; it has to feel natural. Some people whisper, and others shout out loud. Daniel Roseberry – there are big pressures around him, but he is trying to keep things small and intimate.

**What’s the future of shows?**
I cannot say what will happen in 15 or 20 years but there are things being added now that together make these things… not ‘bigger’ or ‘better’, but, sort of, ‘fuller’. After Covid, it came back stronger, not in terms of the money, but because people were eager. All the same people in the front row who would complain that fashion was dead and the calendar was boring were the first ones to say, ‘I am craving to go to a show!’

**Speaking of new developments, are you using AI?**
Yes, for the set, for designing décor, for images. For things like translations, AI is a million times faster than a human, and that is a gain in time and productivity. I’d be super happy if we could reduce the work time in fashion week from 18 hours to a normal day. Not to pay anyone less, but to allow people to rest a bit more. I am actually a bit sad about being so old. If I could go until 2060, the changes that we’ll see in the next decades are huge. I am going to miss all that. Did you ever speak to Sophia?

**Who is Sophia?**
She is the most advanced humanoid. I went to talk to her. I think she might be back in Hong Kong now.

**You brought her to Paris for a show?**
To Milan for Hugo Boss. Sophia talks to you in 80 languages. She has eyes that look at you, and her facial elements are like a human. After five minutes you feel like you are in front of a human. And you kind of fall in love with her.

**In what capacity was she involved?**
We had one that was at the entrance welcoming the guests, talking to all of them. Like a hostess, but more than a hostess. Everyone could talk to the second one after the show, and there was a third one sitting as a guest. I think the woman next to her was a bit shy. I went to talk to the engineer and asked how it all works. Basically, she has two cameras in her eyes and a microphone to listen to what we say. It takes milliseconds for her to give you the appropriate answer. There was not one answer that was wrong. But she has a hard time walking; she cannot walk. She can touch but cannot grab. So, I asked the engineer, ‘Why? When will you have a full humanoid who will be able to be totally autonomous?’ And they said in 25-30 years. They started the version they have now in 2007; it took them 16 years.

**What would you do with a humanoid like that? Why this interest?**
Part of my job is having an interest in everything. There was a moment, years ago, when I was starting to get frustrated because clients would go to specialists instead of me, and to be honest that hurt my ego. But then I realized I didn’t want to be a specialist. Specialists are amazing, but they master one thing only. I want to be the best generalist who knows all the best specialists. Like a doctor – you trust him to send you to the best specialists. That changed my attitude to work. I want to know about everything, and that makes everything interesting. There’s no subject I wouldn’t touch – cars, football, rugby, food, fashion, theatre, music, cinema, art, books, nature. I am a scuba diver, and there is so much underwater that we have not explored. You know, why spend trillions to go to Mars when there is so much to discover right here?

1. Staged in a purpose-built grey box installed on the grounds of the École Militaire, the Dior Homme Spring/Summer 2024 collection featured 51 models rising out of trapdoors in the floor, as ‘hommes fleurs’ in sympathy with the floral theme of the collection. An unbroken lightbox ceiling offered optimal lighting for smartphone photography.

2. Belgian designer Marie Adam-Leenaerdt graduated from La Cambre National School of Visual Arts in 2020, and worked for Balenciaga and Givenchy before launching her eponymous brand in 2023.

3. *Brocanteurs* are antique dealers. In Saint Tropez, there is an open air market each Tuesday and Saturday, where traders sell a range of fresh produce alongside paintings, arts and crafts, and other secondhand items.

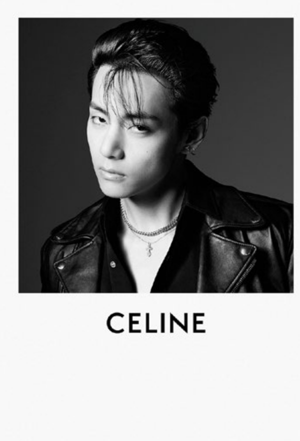
4. In 2008, Moncler launched its Gamme Rouge collection in Paris designed by Thom Browne, followed by Gamme Bleu in 2009 designed by Giambattista Valli in Milan. In 2018, both lines were discontinued as Moncler refocused. Shortly after, Moncler Genius was launched with a rotation of guest designers.

5. The first Moncler Grenoble presentation was held in February 2010 and featured a line-up of many men on a four-level scaffolding structure. Wendy Lam, the writer behind the blog ‘nitro:licious’, who attended the presentation, noted it was ‘a brilliant idea to have 100 models staged on a scaffold at Chelsea Piers to show that Moncler jackets can withstand the wind chills from the Hudson River. They were constantly switching out models to insure they don’t freeze to death or pass out but the scene was worth it, it was truly amazing.’

6. Staged at the Olympia exhibition centre in London, ‘The Art of Genius’ was an event held in February 2023 to celebrate the latest cohort of Genius designers. It included a performance by Alicia Keys, a glamping-wonderland installation by Pharrell Williams, and a robot peepshow by Hiroshi Fujiwara’s FRGMT, among others.

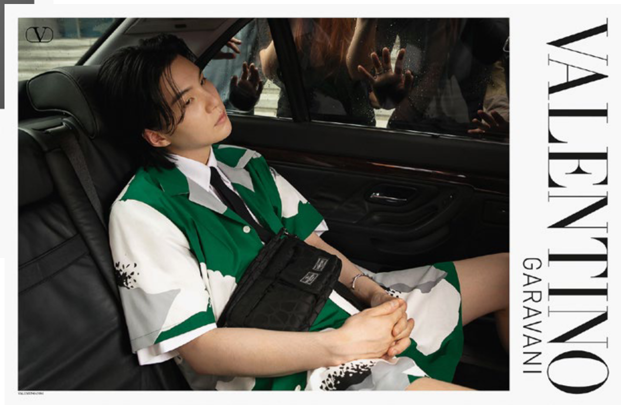
# ‘I pitched Jennie to Chanel and Jisoo to Dior.’

DIOR
COLLECTION ROSE DES VENTS



## The meteoric rise of K-pop in luxury fashion, as told by those who helped instigate it.

BOTTEGA VENETA


VALENTINO
GARAVANI

LADY 95.22 SERIES
DIOR

**By YJ Lee**

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Opposite page, top: Haerin of NewJeans in Dior Joaillerie’s Rose des Vents collection campaign, 2023; bottom, left to right: Lisa of BLACKPINK in Celine’s Spring/Summer 2022 campaign; Suga of BTS in Valentino’s Spring/Summer 2024 campaign. This page, clockwise from top left: V of BTS in Celine’s Winter 2023 campaign; Jaehyun of NCT in Prada’s Spring/Summer 2023 campaign; RM of BTS in Bottega Veneta’s Spring/Summer 2023 campaign; Jisoo of BLACKPINK in Dior’s Lady Dior 95.22 campaign, 2023; Jennie of BLACKPINK in CHANEL’s Chanel 22 bag campaign, 2023.

In 2023 alone, more than 30 K-pop idols were named new global ambassadors for luxury brands. RIIZE, a rookie male group hailing from SM Entertainment, signed with Louis Vuitton a mere 98 days after the release of their debut song, becoming the fastest idols to be appointed fashion ambassadors as of December 2023. Indeed, Louis Vuitton reportedly formed a dedicated taskforce in its Paris headquarters aimed exclusively at signing and liaising with K-pop ambassadors, and closed five more ambassador deals with Korean musicians last year, which accounted for nearly half of the brand's new global ambassador contracts.

While Dior only appointed three new global ambassadors in 2023, all of them were K-pop stars: Jimin of BTS, Haerin of NewJeans, and the brand's first signing of a whole group as an ambassador, TXT. Since appointing BLACKPINK's Jisoo as an ambassador in 2021, Dior's sales in Korea almost doubled from $253 million in 2020 to $473 million, and the house's overall sales from Gen MZs quadrupled.

**'When you try to analyze K-pop from the outside, it can feel like it was a sudden success, but it's a business that's had great potential for decades.'**

For brands, snatching up Korean pop stars is not only a means to stay relevant in Korea – which has become one of the most important markets with the highest luxury goods spending per capita in the world – but also a bet on K-pop's growing dominance everywhere. K-pop album sales and major agency revenues have both tripled since the pandemic, and the industry is projected to be worth $20 billion by 2031; an unprecedented growth rate for its size. In the United States, the world's largest market for digital music and streaming, Korean-language songs were the third-most played after English and Spanish-based music in the first half of 2023. According to Lefty, half of the top 10 fashion influencers during this same period were Korean idols – all four members of BLACKPINK and V of BTS – measured by Instagram engagement rate and Earned Media Value. Others on the list were the Kardashian-Jenners, David Beckham, and Zendaya.

Although K-pop's explosive surge in popularity may seem recent and sudden, its potential has been brewing for over three decades. The first official K-idol group, Seo Taiji and Boys, debuted in 1992, at a time when Koreans were vehemently searching for freedom of self expression. The country had just overthrown a military dictatorship in 1987 and was beginning to form a fresh liberal democracy; recovering from decades of strict government control on education and media. Seo Taiji and Boys emerged from the aftermath of extreme sociopolitical turbulence, and appeared in front of a generation ripe for change. They swept the country with their fusion of hip-hop and electronica, and for the first time, Korea saw the emergence of a 'fandustry', where people lined up to buy idol merchandise and assembled competing fandoms. 'They became a religion for all the kids,' says Gee Eun, leading K-pop stylist and visual director of Seoul-based record company, The Black Label. As the government continued to lift censorship regulations on imported media and major broadcasting throughout the '90s, opportunists jumped in and established entertainment companies in order to produce more idol groups. It was during this time that the 'Big 3' K-pop labels – SM, JYP, and YG – were founded. 'There was this shift in culture. It was like everything else that came afterward was acceptable because these groups opened a new door,' Gee Eun says.

Then, in 1997, the Asian financial crisis put many Koreans out of business and in dire debt. The government sought to bolster the economy by investing heavily in cultural exports, and poured hundreds of millions into creating jobs in locally made music, film, fashion and art. For Korea, popular culture was as important a product category as the country's automotive and IT industries. The recession had ironically catapulted both its production and consumption power, leading to the first Korean Wave – or *Hallyu* – throughout Asia in the early 2000s.

For the next decade, as demand for Korean music and dramas continued to rise all over Asia – namely China and Japan – K-pop made relatively incremental progress Stateside and in Europe. And the first time K-pop formed a relationship with European luxury fashion on a meaningful level was in 2016, when Chanel offered an exclusive ambassador contract to G-Dragon, the leader of YG's breakout male group, BigBang. 'I wondered if such a thing was possible, but at the same time, it was expected,' says KB Lee, a creative director who connects various brands and artists to Korea, and a personal friend and consultant of G-Dragon. 'He was the most influential artist in Asia at the time and I was really curious how a fashion house like Chanel would accept him. The relationship between K-pop and luxury fashion houses completely changed after that.'

Mirim Lee, former fashion director of *Harper's Bazaar* Korea and co-founder of TMN Agency with KB, remembers the first time G-Dragon and Gee Eun – then the visual director at YG – attended Paris Fashion Week together. 'G-Dragon and Chanel had this process of getting to know each other. They were both very open to experiencing new things,' she recalls.

In the following interview, Gee Eun, KB, and Mirim sat down with *System* to trace the origins and meteoric success of K-pop culture, and discuss the ever-evolving impact and influence of K-ambassadors on Europe's biggest luxury fashion brands.

**'Kids used to sneak out or run away from home to audition and train to become a K-pop idol. But these days it's become a chosen profession.'**

**You were young students in the late '80s and early '90s, when K-pop started burgeoning. What do you remember about this time?**

**KB Lee**: When I was young I liked music before fashion and I was really influenced by groups like Deux [duo from the early 1990s]. I would go to Itaewon [neighbourhood in Seoul] to find the shoes they used to wear.

**Mirim Lee**: I really liked Seo Taiji and Boys. I remember their beanie with the big 'S' logo was really popular.

**Gee Eun**: I was still in high school in the beginning of K-pop's heyday. We always had celebrities before that but with groups such as Seo Taiji and Boys and Deux, that's when we started getting fan merchandise and we used to decorate everything with their photos. We would stand in line to try and buy Seo Taiji's accessories or Deux's advertisement catalogues. Then with the next generation of groups, H.O.T. and Sechs Kies, we started getting this idea of separate, competing fanbases. There was this shift in culture from just buying tapes to participating in fashion codes and I was a kid that grew up in that. I remember Seo Taiji wore this giant acrylic peace sign as a necklace and they sold it in school supply stores, and I so desperately wanted to be cool enough to wear it. It was like everything that came afterward was acceptable because these groups opened a new door.

**Seo Taiji and Boys were decidedly hip-hop. What do you think inspired their style, which we can now say became the beginning of K-pop fashion?**

**Mirim**: The music. Idol fashion follows their musical genre. That's the same then and now.

**Gee**: It's comprehensive of multiple things rather than one single source of inspiration. Musicians are often inspired by other musicians or their genre, which shows in their work. That is then expressed through their clothing, and when [I work as a stylist for these idols] I come in to add expertise to that. It's a coming together of experts from different areas, creating a new style and thereby a better, more interesting result. You could never succeed by copying a certain style, so idols take these various elements and make it their own.

**South Korea underwent a lot of cultural and political change during this period, with the 1987 Democratic Uprising[1], the 1988 Seoul Olympics[2], and the Asian financial crisis[3]. How do you think these sociopolitical events impacted the entertainment industry that eventually gave rise to K-pop?**

**KB**: With entertainment or even sports, whenever there's a big economic event, consumer spending behaviour changes, especially when people are recovering from a bad economy. If you look at early '90s K-pop – and even K-pop now, post-pandemic – everything has gotten flashier.

**Gee**: The way I see it, entertainment is a forever business. Even when the economy is bad, or when it's politically unstable, people always want to be comforted or cheered up through music. I think every economic and political depression is closely correlated to this kind of industry. People want to find an outlet. The current idol fan culture is this reaction against modern day problems and young people wanting to find an outlet, to hold onto something. When you try and analyze K-pop from the outside, it might look like it was a sudden success, but this is clearly a business that had the potential to succeed for decades. And Korea as a society, we have this collective tendency to do our best in everything. We can survive anywhere in the world.

**Before Korea became a global phenomenon in fashion, music, television, and cinema, there was *Hallyu* that swept Asia in the '90s and 2000s by way of Korean dramas. Why and how do you think Korean content was able to gain so much popularity abroad?**

**Mirim**: Korean dramas gained

popularity when they started being exported and distributed in China. Korean content was welcomed because there were a lot of regulations around Chinese content at the time. In Korea, we had many Number Ones – whether it was in music or television – but our market is comparatively small, so there was always a lot of cut-throat competition.
**KB**: That's why K-pop became so famous, since the Korean market is small and entertainment companies started looking to foreign markets. Compared to somewhere like Japan where they have a larger domestic market and can stay within.

**What distinguishes K-pop idols from other celebrities?**
**Mirim**: When I worked as an editor, the reaction to editorials with actors and idols were very different. Idol fans are more action-oriented. They proactively jump in to support their idol and there's a very strong mentality to make their favourite group or member the best. Let's say we had an actor on the cover one month and an idol the next, and they were both comparatively popular. But there's a big difference in direct sales of the magazine or the number of likes and comments when it comes to idols. We would shoot different cover versions for each member and they would all sell out offline.

**What's the source of this solidarity K-pop fans have with each other and their idols?**
**KB**: The idol fan culture is really developed here. In the U.S. for example, if you like a musician, you might just listen to their songs or go see their performance. But with K-pop, there are a lot of other activities you can participate in as a fan. There are fan signing events and album merchandise. There are a lot of programs to strengthen and sustain fan activities.
**Mirim**: That brings more opportunities for fans to communicate with their idols more actively.

**While it's common nowadays for K-pop idols to also act in film, TV, or live theatre, that was not always the case. K-pop idols started disrupting other areas of the entertainment industry within Korea before they went abroad. How do you think the perception toward idols has changed over the years?**
**Mirim**: Idols nowadays are influencing diverse categories, not just fashion and TV, but also art. There definitely used to be pushback and judgement against that at first, but now there's a mutual need. Idols need to partake in diverse activities and these other industries also gain lots of new exposure through them.
**Gee:** It's changed a lot over the last 30 years. Back in the day, when a singer crossed over to acting, people pointed fingers right away. A lot of idol members tried to act in dramas and not all of them might have been good, which became controversial. But there are exceptionally talented artists who also succeeded in acting and yet it took 30 years for people to see that and accept them. The idol trainee culture also changed; whereas before, aspiring idols only trained to sing and dance, now they master all these languages and they're ready to also act. The older generation of trainees used to face a lot of resistance and opposition from their parents. Kids used to sneak out or run away from their homes to audition and train. But now, the K-pop idol has become a chosen profession. Parents are willing to support their children – if they're talented and show potential – by whatever means necessary. Succeeding as an idol is incomparable to studying hard and going to a good university then getting a job at a company on a decent salary. BLACKPINK just got honorary MBEs in England. They shine and honour entire nations. That's a whole other dimension of success. There are still some further improvements to be made in terms of how we look at celebrities, but our general perception of them has changed in a fundamentally positive way.

**'The relationship between K-pop and luxury fashion completely changed in 2016, after G-Dragon became Chanel's first Asian global ambassador.'**

**What about the perception towards K-pop stylists and K-pop fashion?**
**Gee:** I majored in fashion design and everyone tried to talk me out of becoming a stylist. We used to be called 'coordinators' instead of stylists and would take care of everything including hair and makeup. There was this image of stylists as people who were looked down on; someone who was always waiting on the celebrity. But while I was at YG [Entertainment], a lot of that changed as our artists started dictating trends. Back around 2006, retailers such as Boon the Shop refused to lend musicians clothing, only actors. That infuriated me. It made no sense to discriminate between actors and musicians. We took it up to the people at the top and I became the first K-pop stylist they lent clothing to. Korean magazines also used to never let external stylists style their editorials, only editors. But I thought that was unfair because I also worked hard and I was respected for my work. It was crucial for me to manage everything related to our artists' visual representation. So I became the first external stylist that did editorials for *Vogue* Korea, with BigBang. Editors had such pride back then, but I'm grateful they allowed me.

**There's this saying that there was K-pop fashion before Gee Eun, and K-pop *Fashion* – with a capital F – after Gee Eun. Can you talk about the evolution of K-pop style?**
**Gee:** That's so funny. I'm still alive! I grew up with musicians who mostly wore stage clothing, only for the performance. Think sequin and spangles. I always thought that was a shame and I wanted my artists to be cool both on and off stage. I wanted people – and even the artists themselves – to believe that they were born cool. You can't just throw something on someone and expect them to look natural. The awkwardness shows and people can tell. So instead of telling them what to wear I would slowly tease them on the hottest collection or piece and say things like, 'Oh, you don't have this?' The curious ones would catch on and start getting interested themselves. As I said, I had to make my artists believe that they were born stylish. That's why I never used to do interviews or put myself out there, because as soon as I do that it would discredit their own sense of style. First I do a lot of listening and self-education on the artist's inspirations behind the music, and I try to understand the concept, and how to present these points visually. I was into punk fashion, subcultures, and vintage. I would mix and match with items you could buy in-store, switch up the accessories, and I think that's what people are saying changed. It also made K-pop style more accessible when fans realized they could buy and wear these items themselves. That contributed to BigBang becoming trendsetters, especially G-Dragon. As soon as he wore something, replicas would be everywhere in Dongdaemun storefronts the next day. He became a fashion icon, and while there are many stylish idols, there hasn't been another one quite like him, whom people are always curious about what he's going to wear next. I really feel a lot of responsibility as we prepare for his upcoming album.

**'My goal with BLACKPINK was to sign with four major brands, one for each member. It was clear in my mind which brands matched which member.'**

**G-Dragon became Chanel's first-ever Asian global ambassador in 2016. What was your reaction when you first heard the news?**
**KB:** I thought it was incredible. I wondered if such a thing was possible, but at the same time, it was expected. G-Dragon was the most influential artist in Asia at the time and I was really curious how a fashion house like that would accept him. He was a true pioneer. The relationship between K-pop and luxury fashion houses completely changed after that.
**Mirim**: Before that, some Korean celebrities were invited to fashion events or shows, but when G-Dragon signed with Chanel – and I think Doona Bae's first Louis Vuitton contract happened around the same time – it really moved things to the next level, beyond just being invited on an individual basis.
**Gee:** It wasn't a sudden announcement for us because we had put in a lot of effort behind the scenes to make it happen. I was a huge fan of Karl Lagerfeld and Hedi [Slimane] at Saint Laurent, so at first we went to the Paris shows out-of-pocket, out of pure interest and curiosity. GD [G-Dragon] loved going to the shows and realized fashion runways can also be a huge source of inspiration. The whole lighting and performance and production of fashion week had an impact on him. I was close friends with Kim Young-Seong, Chanel's Fabric Director, who is also Korean. If Virginie [Viard] was Karl's right hand, Young-Seong was his left. I introduced them because I wanted Chanel to know we had this amazing artist in Korea. And whenever GD made an appearance at fashion week, he became the talk of the town, and it had this ripple effect, season after season. After a couple years doing the rounds of fashion week, Chanel asked us if GD could only attend Chanel, exclusively. But it was tricky for an artist like him to travel all the way to Europe just for one show. It costs upwards of hundreds of thousands of dollars just to bring him and all his staff over. So Chanel provided a solution, which was to sign an ambassador contract. It was unprecedented, not only because GD is Asian, but because he's also a male artist signing with [exclusively womenswear] Chanel. It worked because Karl had a few menswear pieces per show and GD could also pull off womenswear. Such language around being an 'ambassador' didn't even exist before him.

**It took another few years until many more K-pop idols began to represent luxury fashion houses. Considering the Internet age and the speed of the fashion cycle, G-Dragon was really ahead of the game. What do you think made this possible?**
**KB**: Before him there was a tendency to maybe not respect idols musically, but he put out really refreshing music. He dominated fashion trends in Asia and I think brands wanted in on that power.
**Gee:** I didn't feel it was a long gap because BLACKPINK debuted as soon as BigBang wrapped most of their activities. My biggest goal with BLACKPINK was to sign four major brands, one for each member, because I couldn't do that with BigBang. Menswear is a smaller market. With BLACKPINK, it was clear in my mind from the start which brands matched which member. I pitched Jennie to Chanel before their debut; I told them there is this beautiful girl and they would regret it if they didn't do something with her. I always knew Jisoo was Dior. GD and BLACKPINK paved the road for this surge in K-pop ambassadorships. There was a couple of years between them because it took the management of these luxury houses a few years to decide if it was worth the investment and make their decision. Now, most brands' budgets for Asia are used mainly in Korea.

> **'Korean celebrities used to be marketed in Asia only, but now you find Hoyeon's billboards in Paris or BLACKPINK and BTS in Times Square.'**

**Why was it so important for you to sign each BLACKPINK member to a different brand? Did you feel that would add to their success?**
**Gee:** It wasn't about signing for any amount of money. I simply wanted the best for each member. For example, if you think about celebrity award shows, you want your artist to wear the best, most beautiful piece. The girl wearing the second-prettiest piece would be so sad. So for every member to wear the best piece from a brand, they each had to be the best on their own. Me having an understanding of each brand's identity, I played matchmaker. There's a one-in-a-trillion chance for every single member of an idol group to be so unique and special. I knew BLACKPINK was like that at their debut, and they have worked very hard to maintain their status over the years. Their accomplishments are all due to their own efforts; they made it for themselves.

**Do you feel the perception or treatment towards Korean celebrities, editors, and brands has changed over the years, particularly within European luxury fashion houses?**
**Mirim**: It's changed a lot. There used to be less than 10 editors from Korea at each show and now that number is threefold. We used to be placed all the way at the end, but now Korean editors and ambassadors get the best seats, like right next to the CEO.
**Gee:** Celebrities have always been treated well but there's been a big difference in how Korean staff are treated at fashion week. The overall level of recognition and awareness about Korea has really improved. I do a lot of business with Japan, and I often ask Japanese brands or companies what's the new hot thing to look into. They're like, 'Why are you asking us? Korea is the hottest thing right now!' I think it's really our time. As someone who started working before this boom, it's so exhilarating. We used to get the last of the collection samples after they'd done the rounds of the other countries; they'd be all worn by the time they got to Korea. Then, with BigBang, Hedi sent us Saint Laurent collection pieces straight from the runway so they could wear it a few days later at an award show. That felt like real success to me.

**There's almost no luxury or beauty brand without a K-pop ambassador now. What are the biggest pros of this?**
**KB**: The biggest pros are social media engagement and influence. And I think it's helping change a lot of beauty standards. Korean celebrities used to be marketed in Asia only, but now you can find Hoyeon [Jung]'s billboards in Paris or BLACKPINK and BTS in the middle of Times Square. There's more acceptance towards Asian beauty.

**What about the cons? Some ambassadors sign as whole teams rather than as individuals, and there have been some negative reactions against ambassadors that seem too young for certain luxury brands. Is there anything brands should change about the way they appoint K-pop ambassadors?**
**Gee:** Fashion is extremely personal. It hinges on taste. Signing as a group does feel as though the relationship has been interpreted as a business one. They're accepting a whole group as one image or concept. I don't think that's wrong though, because that might be what the entertainment agency wants as well. I am curious how signing such young artists translates to actual return on investments, considering young people's buying power. With GD, whenever he wore a certain Chanel bag it would sell out much faster in countries like China, so you could directly see the influence. We have to wait and see if today's younger ambassadors can have that effect. That said, you can now see the clothing and styles coming out of luxury brands is also getting younger.
**KB**: We were just talking about this the other day. When we first started going to Paris fashion shows with GD around 2013 – before his Chanel contract – we went to Junya [Watanabe], Saint Laurent, and other brand shows. People always asked me about him even before they knew who he was, like, 'Who is that? Why are so many people waiting outside for him?' I think him attending a variety of shows – before being a part of one brand – and displaying various styles made an impression on people. But now, as soon as a celebrity becomes a bit famous, they sign with a brand right away. It's nice to acclimate to one brand, but personal style is bound to have different stages and transitions. Sometimes you like Rick Owens and other times you like Dries [Van Noten]. I'm not telling celebrities to study fashion, but to just decide and say, 'Okay, you're Gucci, you're Chanel, you're Louis Vuitton', it limits what that individual can showcase about their own style.
**Mirim**: Before GD, Korean celebrities might have been invited to shows here and there, but there wasn't a case where someone did the rounds through various runways. I arranged for GD and his team to go to some of their first shows in Paris because I wanted to shoot him for *Harper's Bazaar* Korea. Him, Gee Eun, and Taeyang, another member of BigBang, were all very open to experiencing new things and had a lot of fun. It would be more ideal if people could experience a diverse range of shows and brand editorials and decide for themselves which brand they match or get along with. G-Dragon and Chanel had this relationship and process of getting to know each other and respected each other for that. That's a great way to become an ambassador. Signing based on the contract amount is really a pity. It's an issue of authenticity.
**KB**: GD was personal friends with Young-Seong at Chanel. We'd always go say hi to her and Virginie [Viard] and gift them our Nike collabs. GD would just have a casual conversation with their shoe designer and talk about what he liked, and Chanel would actually make samples for him in that style. Their relationship was really genuine. It was good timing that he and BigBang were very influential in Asia, and there were people around him like Mirim and Gee Eun to make editorial content around that. There was a mutual desire from all parties to want to highlight their work and they had each other. Korean fashion really changed during this time.
**Mirim**: In the case of NewJeans too, they didn't designate the whole group to one brand; they considered each member's characteristic and matched them to their respective brands accordingly. I think that's a good example, where each member gets to stand out and it's a win-win with the brands.

**Do you think this K-wave is a fleeting trend or something that's here to stay?**
**KB**: The quality of K-pop and K-cinema is getting better and better, so it's here to stay. Other countries will also continue producing high-quality content, and in the end the world will become more diverse culturally. If a certain part of the world, or race, dominated culture before, that structure will now be shattered.
**Gee:** It seems like there is a movement and effort to systemize K-pop culture so it can last in the long-run. If this process of training talent and producing groups can be systemized and applied in other countries, that will really prove K-pop's worth. The fact that companies are experimenting with training diverse individuals shows that many industry people believe in this potential too. I read in an article recently that *Billboard* created a separate award category for K-pop and I didn't like that. Why separate K-pop from other genres? It's confining K-pop to one small category when Korean idols are just as, if not more, talented, and can be judged and voted based on the same fair standards as other artists. Now is the time for us to continue marching forward.

1. The June Democratic Struggle, also known as the June Democracy Movement and the June Uprising, was a nationwide pro-democracy movement in South Korea that generated mass protests from the 10th to the 29th of June 1987.

2. The 1988 Seoul Olympics were the second summer Olympic Games held in Asia, and the first held in South Korea.

3. A financial crisis started in Thailand in July 1997 and spread across East Asia, wreaking havoc on economies in the region and leading to spillover effects in Latin America and Eastern Europe in 1998.

# ‘The images from *Euphoria* have been on a lot of moodboards.’

## Costume designer Heidi Bivens on the fashion which inspires television which inspires fashion.

**Interview by Rana Toofanian**
**Portrait by Blossom Berkofsky**

Photograph taken in artists Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe’s installation entitled *Room 7 – The Random Forest*, as part of the *Colony Sound* exhibition, Marlborough Gallery, London.

Few TV shows have inspired runway collections like *Euphoria* has. The aesthetic, mood and styling of HBO's hit series, which follows a group of Californian teens as they navigate love, relationships, sex, addiction, and identity, can be seen in everything from Miu Miu's low-cut pleated skirts and shrunken cardigans to Coperni's high-school inspired ensembles. Indeed, the show's ability to revitalize luxury labels, raise up independent brands, and even revive entire categories of clothing is a phenomenon that's been described as the '*Euphoria* effect'.

Much of the show's impact on pop culture can be attributed to costume designer and stylist Heidi Bivens. Just four years and two seasons in, Bivens has created a mark on the cultural zeitgeist so distinct it merits the creation of a 272-page book, titled *Euphoria Fashion*, in its honour. Published by the show's producers A24, the book serves as a comprehensive encyclopedia of annotated archival images, offering readers a feast of mesmerising visuals and intimate conversations with cast members Zendaya, Sydney Sweeney, and Hunter Schafer, among others. The foreword is written by Jeremy Scott, who describes Bivens' ability to bring complicated characters to life through their clothes as 'a skill very few people have'.

Becoming a celebrated stylist and Hollywood costume designer wasn't always on the cards for Bivens. Born in Annandale, Virginia, she moved to New York to study film and journalism with the hope of landing a job on a movie set. After all, styling 'wasn't a career path many people were familiar with,' she recalls. But after interning at *Women's Wear Daily* and *W Magazine*, she landed a job as a wardrobe assistant on Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Bivens now balances her work on hit TV shows with styling for Chanel – collaborating on several campaigns with Inez and Vinoodh for the house. Bivens sat down with *System* to talk about transcending the boundaries between fashion and film, and how the entertainment industry's ever-evolving love affair with clothing has been consolidated.

**'I wanted to create style tribes within the [*Euphoria*] school. I always loved how *i-D* would shoot groups hanging out in a London park or outside a club.'**

**What were your earliest memories of fashion?**

Annandale, Virginia is more built up today than it was when I was growing up there; it was a suburb back then. I moved to New York when I was 18. I grew up with an older sister who was very into cinema, especially more obscure and art-house films, and who had film posters all over her bedroom walls. She turned me on to David Lynch and other filmmakers like Gus Van Sant and Jim Jarmusch. It was through my love of film that I knew I wanted to come to New York and try to get a job working on a movie set. I just didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. So, I applied and got into Hunter, which is part of the City University of New York and at the time had a reputable film programme. I used to brag that Woody Allen went there; I don't brag so much any more. So, I moved to New York and lived in college dorms. I studied journalism and filmmaking because I was interested in writing in general, writing narratives and stories. In particular, I was interested in investigative stories. That's why I liked the idea of working for a magazine, so I started looking for internships.

When I finally got a job working at a magazine, I knew there was a job with the title 'fashion editor'. Ever since I can remember, my mum collected *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. I would look at her magazines, and I was very aware that someone had to pick out the clothes for these shoots. But it wasn't until I began working for a magazine, trying to get my first bylines as an intern, that I started to understand what styling was. I then got a job as a market editor for *Paper Magazine* very early in my career. And that led to me doing shoots when I was 19 or 20 years old.

**How would you describe your experience working as a stylist and market editor in New York at that time?**

I interned at *Women's Wear Daily* and *W* when Fairchild Publications was on 34th Street near the Empire State Building. It was very exciting to work in this huge newsroom. Everyone worked in one room except for the editor-in-chief and the publisher, whose windowed offices were along the walls. The fashion editors at the time I really looked up to were Joe McKenna and Alex White. I would see them putting their books together, working on their portfolios, laying all their tear sheets out on the desks and on the floor. Alex White did that 'Cowboy Kate' homage story for *W* with Craig McDean [in 1995], and I was stunned by how beautiful the images were. It was a great era for *W*. [Creative director] Dennis Freedman was there making amazing work, too. I was at these magazines because I thought I wanted to be a writer. Then I discovered fashion styling, which at the time wasn't a career path many people were familiar with. I quickly realized I could make a very decent living as a stylist, and that it could also be a segue to get onto film sets by drawing on my skills and applying them to costume design. The first job I ever got on a movie was as a wardrobe PA on *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I remember talking to the film's costume designer, Melissa Toth, about what value I could bring to the project when I was vying for the job. I told her I could approach prepping the movie like an editorial. I could call brands; I could ask to borrow samples; I could help build the characters' closets through the same methods I would use when styling fashion editorials. At the time, that wasn't something costume designers were doing, and there wasn't much crossover between fashion and entertainment in terms of styling. Arianne Phillips was one of the only people who was doing both. It was uncharted territory to blend the two. So, instinctively, I felt I had a bit of an edge.

**Was there anyone you looked to as a mentor?**

Arianne Phillips[1] was definitely a chosen mentor of mine. I was inspired by her and how she was setting new precedents. By the time I met her, she had probably already heard me talking about how I was inspired by her, so to me, it felt like we had already known each other. I think for her it was a fast connection to me because I had so much respect for what she does. Lou Eyrich is another chosen mentor of mine. She works with Ryan Murphy, and designs costumes, and produces and oversees all of his shows. She has also set new precedents. I'm constantly attracted to women who are breaking ceilings; women who have a vision that either a studio or a producer or a magazine says no to because 'we've never done that before', but who then find their people to help them break through and set a new precedent. That's so exciting to me on a lot of levels. It's sort of a metaphor for how I want to live my life in general.

**What makes a particular work or aesthetic important to you?**

Sometimes people ask me about my favourite films or costume designers. It's such a difficult question to answer because my love of film and TV is about storytelling, not so much aesthetics. It's about the emotion and the feeling, and costumes can bring both. I often remember films and stories because of the memory and emotions they evoke. But then there are films like *Blade Runner*, which make you feel a certain way because of the way they look. Then there are films that are incredibly beautiful and have a singular vision behind the production design and the costumes, but they're really bad movies.

**As a costume designer, how do you balance the visual appeal of a costume with practical consideration? For instance, does the costume work for the actor? Are they comfortable? And then, of course: is the costume authentic, and is it believable within the context of the film?**

There are definitely different approaches depending on the genre, the director's vision, and all the details that go into what type of film or TV show it's supposed to be. For me, I want to be involved with stories that involve world-building, even if it's contemporary. I really love the fantasy aspect of being able to create a reality within a world that doesn't necessarily reflect stark realism. I've done pedestrian costumes that are supposed to be really real. For example, when you're working on films that are either biopics or historical, it is important to stay as true to the history as the director's vision allows. But I love it when a costume designer has had the opportunity to do a historically accurate costume, but they do their own take on it. I enjoy those types of films more than ones that are historically accurate.

**'I used an incredible amount of vintage items, so that people weren't like, 'Oh, I saw that on the runway today, or in Saks Fifth Avenue last week.''**

**How did *Euphoria* come about?**

I had never done television work before *Euphoria* came up. I'd mostly worked on smaller independent films, not even big studio films. But I was continuously searching for jobs, costume designing, because I wanted to get more experience of being on set and seeing how things really work. It's been my school. Actually, in a couple of weeks, I'm flying to London to shadow my friend Peter Glanz, who's directing a film called *Polite Society* with Richard E. Grant and Claire Foy. I'm very academic about my approach. Even on *Eternal Sunshine*, I walked into the office, and I really took note of how the costume designer set up her office.

**And so, with *Euphoria*, how did the opportunity come about? You said**

**you'd never done any TV, so what drew you to work on it?**
*Euphoria* creator Sam Levinson had asked me to work on his first feature, *Assassination Nation*, but I had already done Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* and so I felt that it was a bit redundant because I'm always trying to challenge myself. In Hollywood, especially in entertainment, you can easily become pigeonholed if you do too much of the same thing. But then, when it was time for *Euphoria*, I liked the script a lot, but I didn't know if it was something that I should agree to because I had never done TV before. TV is a big time commitment, and I would have to move to LA for the show. So, I asked some younger friends who were out of high school but closer in age to the characters in the pilot script – and who eventually became part of the show, and these friends were like, you should do this. They felt very strongly about it. This was pre- Zendaya or Drake signing on.

Then the cast just rounded out really nicely – I already knew Barbie [Ferreira] and Alexa [Demie] – and so I felt really good about it. The pilot required minimal commitment before it was greenlit. I was only in LA for five or six weeks to do the pilot, and I didn't have to sign on to do the show. A lot of people just do pilots and then they don't end up doing the show because of other commitments. But after I saw the pilot, I was really floored. I get quite emotional thinking about it. I was just really impressed by the cast and the storytelling, and it made me feel like I was part of something different and something that people hadn't seen on television before.

**How would you describe your vision for the costumes in *Euphoria*?**
From the beginning, I wanted to create style tribes within the school. I always loved how *i-D* Magazine would photograph style tribes on the streets of London, as well as groups hanging out outside a club or in a park. I wanted to create pockets of that within the school. I pitched to the producers that we would have recurring background [characters], so that we could create these little cliques within the school. That is where my idea for all the main characters' looks came from, each one comes out of their own individual style tribes. I knew I wanted each of the main cast to represent their own clique.

**How did you approach developing each individual character's unique look, while maintaining a coherent overall visual aesthetic?**
I talk a lot about what I call style rules, which is a filter that I run everything through. It's kind of like how you shop for yourself: if you know what you like and you have a personal style – and not everyone does – you could walk into a store and go through racks of clothes, say: yes, no, yes, no, yes, no. It's a similar process for me with the characters, but I have to get in the mind frame of the character. It's not like I'm a method costume designer where I'm inhabiting the character's emotions. But I have a list of style rules of, for example, the colours they like, including the colours they will and won't wear. Fezco wears crewnecks, he doesn't wear V-necks. Jacob Elordi's Nate doesn't wear skinny jeans. So, there are these rules that then evolve with the storytelling. Jules, for instance, when we meet her in episode one of season one, is very femme and trying to be girly and even cutesy. By season two, she's really turned off by the idea of being overly sexualized as a teenage girl. The experiences of the characters are going to affect their decisions each morning when they put on their clothes. That's how we all live our lives, right?

***Euphoria* has obviously attracted a lot of young viewers who are influenced by the show's fashion. What were your considerations for the audience, and especially young viewers, when working on the respective looks?**
I'm always thinking of the audience. I'm always putting myself in their place. That's so important for me – and for any costume designer – because you're trying to communicate the story however you can. In season one, my main concern was not pulling anyone out of the show by using recognizable fashion. I used an incredible amount of vintage items, so that people weren't like, 'Oh, I saw that on the runway today', or, 'I saw that at Saks Fifth Avenue last week.' I really felt it was important not to use big brands unless it was the guys wearing Supreme or some Hypebeast thing. By the second season, I understood that I had a real opportunity to harness the audience's attention, and that I could excite them with the costumes, while still trying to stump them with vintage. I really enjoy creating a costume for a character that incorporates vintage clothing that maybe people can't figure out what it is – and then, it's amazing how they are able to figure it out.

**'The first place actors come to is the costume fitting. So, they're getting to know the character through our collaboration. It's a very intimate relationship.'**

**'There are films that are incredibly beautiful and have a singular vision behind the production design and the costumes, but they're still really bad movies.'**

One of the ways I was able to do that is with the help of costume houses in LA, these gigantic warehouses full of vintage clothing organized by decade. They are rental houses only available to people in the film and TV industry. That was a huge resource for me, more so in season one than season two. For the second season, I leaned into current fashions more.

***Euphoria* has also affected how people dress and how stylists work in so many ways. What would you say has been the cultural impact of the show?**
It's really hard to take any credit for that because there's no way of proving it. I'm a real hard facts kind of girl. In my opinion, it would be very presumptuous of me to take credit for anything. What I will say is that I've come to understand that the images from the show have been on a lot of mood boards. And that makes me believe it has become some sort of reference for people in creative ways. I often talk about this thing called the 'creative ether'. And the 'creative ether', to me, is the reason why you'll go to shows one season and a number of designers will all be using zipper ruffle details. Or, more broadly speaking, why details come up in different collections. It's also why editors will do trend reports and, some of it could be like ideas leaking, sure, but some of it is coincidence. It lives in this unconscious ether space.

**Also, more people are consuming the same information on social media.**
That's exactly right.

**So, you are looking at culture and subcultures on the internet…**
I just had an opportunity to put it on television. Not only did I have an opportunity to put it on television, I had an opportunity to put it on a hit show. You could call that luck of the draw. But I also think it has a lot to do with the cast, the creative departments, and Sam's writing. As well as HBO's support of the show.

**I'm curious about the dynamics of teamwork in terms of working with fashion photographers, designers, and models as opposed to working with directors, actors, and a film crew. What are some of the differences you've experienced?**
The beautiful thing that comes with age is understanding more about how to navigate different personalities. I love collaborating, and so much of collaborating is understanding people. It's what gives me joy in my work. If I was left to my own devices, I wouldn't have as much fun. I'm not interested in a solitary effort. I've also come to understand my worth more and more, and that's really helped me navigate how to collaborate with different types of creatives, like a director. I come from the school of thought that what the director says goes. In order to create successful costumes for a film or television show, it's important to have a good director and for them to either have a singular vision or let you do your thing. Sometimes it can be both. When it's both, that's when the magic happens. That's what happens with Sam on *Euphoria*. He has a vision I'm just able to plug into. And I have a sixth sense when it comes to communicating ideas and collaborating. I joke about it a lot because I often know what someone's going to say; if they're going to like it or not before they open up about it.

So, with a film director, it's really about following their vision. Whereas, when I'm working with a photographer and it's a fashion editorial, it's more of a collaboration where the fashion editor or stylist brings ideas that you come together on. Film and television aren't like that – it's more the director at the helm, while the costume designer is providing a service. It's rare that you find directors who you can have a real collaboration with, in the same way you could with a photographer. So, when you do find those collaborators, you have to hold on to them because they don't come along every day. It has to be a meeting of minds. It can't just be a 'for hire' thing if you want to make the real magic happen.

**And is there a skill that you've gained from navigating one industry, which has proven invaluable when working in another?**
How to work with talent. The first place the actors come is the costume fitting. So, they're building their ideas for their character and getting to know the character in the fittings through their collaboration with the costume designer. It's a very intimate relationship. With styling on fashion shoots, it's often a one-day shoot or a week-long shoot at most. It's usually not a long-term commitment. But you are still building relationships because you will shoot with the same people over and over again. And when you're working as a stylist with celebrity talent, for example, you want to build trusting and intimate relationships. It's important that the talent feels safe and

confident having you dress them. By dressing them, you also help them figure out what works for the shot or the scene and help them to tell a story. That's the similarity between the two career paths: the relationship with the subject, the canvas, the talent, the model.

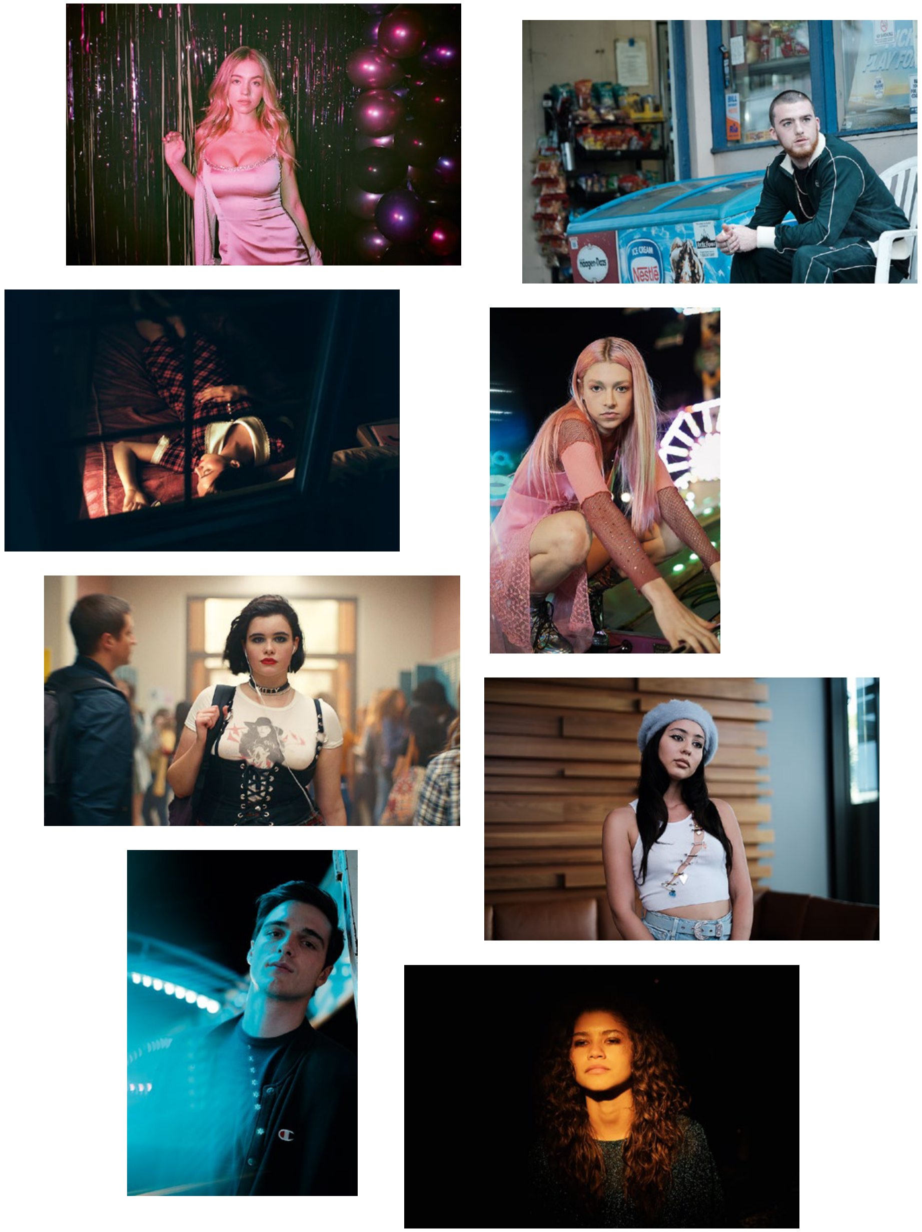
**These things are so collaborative – both fashion editorials and working on a film. How do you feel personally represented in the work you produce and the ideas you cultivate?**
I always hoped that there would be a thread running through all the work; I remember saying that at a pretty young age. I have two real hopes. That there would be something consistent in the work so that people would know I had worked on it just by watching it. The second is that I would be respected by my peers; that I would have a dialogue with my peers, as well as their appreciation. I feel that I have accomplished the second. The first thing is so subjective; it's hard for me to say if I've done that.

**In fashion, there are strict rules about how looks are visualized in editorials – like certain designers that can't be combined or runway looks that have to be included. Are there rules when you work with fashion brands on film and television?**
Lending for film and TV is still a relatively new territory for brands. When everyone was home during the pandemic, watching more TV and more films, we as a culture began to understand the power that film and TV could have on audiences. With that said, it's still relatively new. So, rules? Not so much, but that definitely applies in fashion. It comes in waves, but what I'm really happy to see have changed are the rules about gender. For a very long time you would borrow from top runway designers, and they would have a policy that menswear could only be shot on men and that womenswear could only be photographed on women. I always thought that was really shortsighted, but I never hear that rule thrown out at me any more.

**You've recently been working on several Chanel campaigns with Inez and Vinoodh. How was that experience?**
Collaborating with Inez and Vinoodh, and working with Virginie Viard and Marion Destenay Falempin [Fashion Image Director at Chanel] has been a major highlight for me. Over the past few years I took an intentional detour into film and television, exploring storytelling through costume: Most recently, when fashion styling for editorial or advertising, I've been reminded how having a foot in both industries keeps me curious; researching new and established designers inspires me to keep creating interesting characters.

**What motivates you to keep going and doing this job?**
I have so many interests; way too many things I want to do than I have time for. These many interests take my time and keep me from the one thing that I truly want to do, which is write and direct my own films. I'm hoping to focus more on that now. I've started producing, which has been really exciting because it means I can be involved from the beginning, and not just focus on the minutiae of the costumes. It allows me to look at the big picture.

**Would you say you're optimistic about the future and about future projects?**
It's not announced in the trades yet – so I can't reveal the name or subject matter – but I'm developing a true-crime podcast into a series, with producing partners Bronwyn Cosgrave[2] and Alessandro Del Vigna.[3] I'm also a producer on a feature film that Mary Harron will direct next year called *The Highway Eats People*, and cinematographer Chris Blauvelt's directorial debut *Disco's Out, Murder's In!*[4] The next film I'll costume design is Panos Cosmatos' *Flesh of the Gods* with Oscar Isaac and Kristen Stewart. And I'm hoping to have an opportunity to work as a costume producer, overseeing all things costume-related and ushering new design talent into the industry for all television shows I'm attached to.



From left to right and top to bottom: *Euphoria*'s Cassie (Sydney Sweeney), Fezco (Angus Cloud), Lexi (Maude Apatow), Jules (Hunter Schafer), Kat (Barbie Ferreira), Maddy (Alexa Demie), Nate (Jacob Elordi) and Rue (Zendaya).

© Maude Apatow, Marcell Rév, Eddy Chen/HBO.

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1. Arianne Phillips is an American costume designer. She's worked closely with Tom Ford on his feature films *A Single Man* and *Nocturnal Animals*; closely collaborated with Madonna for two decades, and worked on other classics including *Walk the Line*, *Girl, Interrupted*, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

2. Bronwyn Cosgrave is a Canadian journalist and former features editor of British *Vogue*. She's produced documentaries on Kevyn Aucoin, Manolo Blahnik, and a recent miniseries, *The Super Models*, that follows Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Linda Evangelista and Christy Turlington revisiting their modeling careers.

3. Alessandro Del Vigna is an Italian-Romanian executive producer most known for working on the film *Triangle of Sadness*, which received the Palme d'Or at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. He co-founded the production company Fantasmagoria, based in Rome and Milan, and has worked as a film critic.

4. *Disco's Out, Murder's In!* is a film project based on the book by Heath Mattioli, which has as its strapline: 'The True Story of Frank the Shank and L.A.'s Deadliest Punk Rock Gang.' It chronicles the history of the La Mirada Punks gang, known as the LMP, who were most active in the 1980s and 1990s, and were notorious for beatings, drug dealing and murder.

# Spring/ Summer 2024

The looks of the season, on a cast of ones to watch.

**Photographs by Ryan McGinley**
**Styling by Heidi Bivens**
**Casting by Jennifer Venditti**

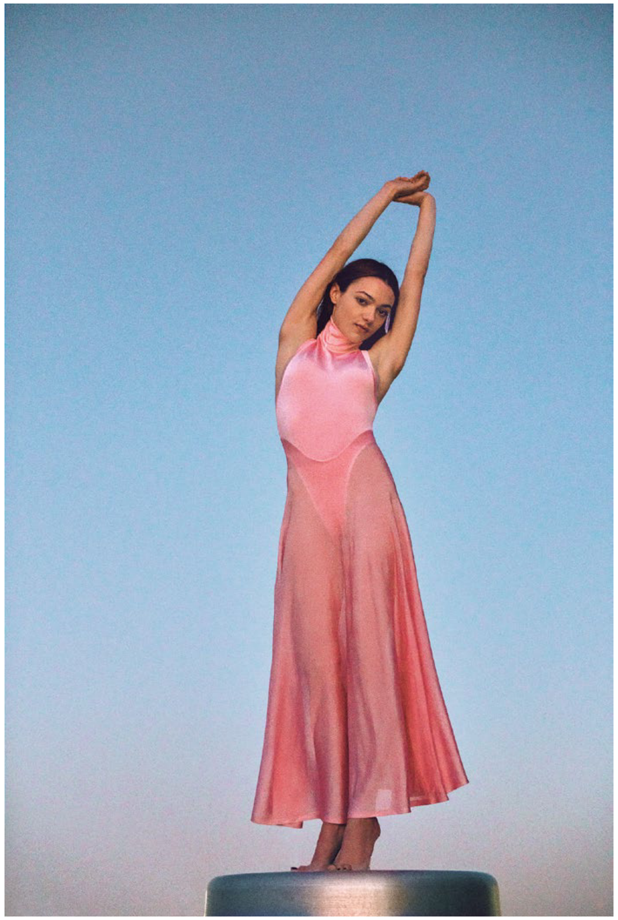
**Lío Mehiel**

Lío wear trousers by Louis Vuitton.
Previous page: Lío wear a shirt by Bode. Jari wears a dress by Simone Rocha.

**Jari Jones**

Jari wears a dress by Collina Strada, and earrings by Justine Clenquet.

MARNI
MARNI



**Lily McInerny**

Lily wears a dress by Alaïa, and shoes by Amina Muaddi.
Opposite page: Lily wears a top, bottoms, shoes, and jacket by Marni.

**Havana Rose Liu**

Havana Rose wears a top, jacket, and skirt by Miu Miu.
Opposite page: Havana Rose wears a dress by Chanel.

**Talia Ryder**

Talia wears a dress, heart necklace, socks and shoes by Celine by Hedi Slimane.

Talia wears a men's jacket by Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.

**Ivy Wolk**

Ivy wears a dress by Lanvin.
Opposite page: Ivy wears a dress by Prada.

Commission

**Théodore Pellerin**

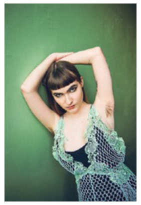
Opposite page: Théodore wears a suit and jersey top by Commission.
Théodore wears a jacket, pants, and scarf by Stella McCartney, and shoes by Jil Sander.

**Josiah Cross**

Josiah wears a top and jacket by Nanushka.
Opposite page: Josiah wears a top, trousers, and shoes by Bode.

Make-up artist: Susie Sobol @ MA + Group. Hair stylist: Dylan Chavles @ PM Artists. Casting director: Jennifer Venditti. Casting associate: Alan Neal. Photographer assistant: Taylor Schantz, Lance Charles. Styling assistant: Shannon Gorman. Executive producers: Shea Spencer @ Artist Commissions, Mary-Clancey Page @ Hen's Tooth Productions. Production: Nicole Tondre @ Hen's Tooth Productions, Felix Frith and Jemma Hinkly @ Hen's Tooth Productions, Lisbeth Carney. Lighting designer: Ari Sadok. Digital tech: Travis Drennen. Video: Tristan Martinez. Production assistant: Andy Martinez, Ryan Collins, KC, Simone Wright. Post-production: Two Three Two Studio. RMS team: Vivienne McFarland, Cade Curran.

All brands featured in this story are available at Selfridges, London.



**Ivy Wolk**
**'People think that I'm being purposely edgy or troll-ish.'**

**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I live in Brooklyn, but I'm from Los Angeles, where I struggled with the sun and my fragile porcelain skin.

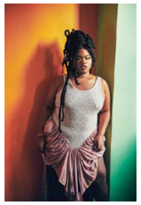
**How would your friends describe you?**
I like to think they'd say acerbic and quick. However, the current girlfriend of a guy that I was obsessed with in college – but who rejected me every time – once described me in a short story she wrote as 'funny, like a car crash is funny.' So that's what I'd say.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
*Mary Poppins* at summer camp when I was seven. It came naturally to me, I didn't have to be taught how to embody anything. I liked playing a weird character, and that's still what I like to do. Sometimes I'm like, 'Damn, where's my star vehicle!', but I could go my whole life just being a character actress.

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
Maggie Gyllenhall in *Secretary* is major. Julianne Moore in *Maps to the Stars* and *May December.* She's everything! Mo'Nique in *Precious.* Lena Dunham and Zosia Mamet in *Girls*…

**Who has given you the best professional advice, and what was it?**
I follow my own heart; that's the advice I give myself. My personal motto is, 'Don't let anybody tell you what you can or can't say.' I have a provocative voice that that has gotten me in trouble many times. But it's something that people keep showing up for. People think that I'm being purposely edgy or troll-ish. I guess some [part] of me does like to poke but, truly, I'm a sensitive person.

**What would you like to have achieved professionally five years from now?**
I want to sell a show that I've written and star in. I want to keep doing stand-up. I want to publish a book. I want to keep working with filmmakers that I view as important. I don't want to be sucked into the corporate Hollywood machine. I want to keep making things that I find honest and transgressive. I want to make movies and TV shows that make you ask questions about yourself and about the world around you.



**Jari Jones**
**'Let me show you the character I can become, rather than just be the token.'**

**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I was born in New Jersey, and I'm currently residing back there right now, which has been cute.

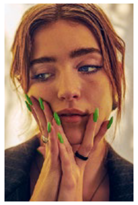
**How would your friends describe you?**
Chaotic, but in the best ways. I don't like to sit in one spot for long.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
Back in the seventies and eighties my grandfather, Billy Jones, was one of the first black male models. He was on the cover of *Ebony*, and signed to Elite and Ford models. But by the time I came around, he'd switched over into the photography world. He would put on these fashion shows called the Peppermint Club where he'd bring in all his friends from New York – I was raised by all these divas and drag queens – and he'd get me, my brother and my cousins to walk in them. These were my first real moments on stage. And then acting came along and I was like, 'Oh, queer child, I get to be anything I want on stage.'

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
Viola Davis in *How to Get Away With Murder* – obsessed! And after reading her memoir, I love how much of her life was brought into her character in *Doubt.* When you're marginalized – I'm trans, I'm black, I'm plus size, so it's not like anybody was encouraging me to go do this kind of thing – to read how she came from nothing and became something incredible is so inspiring. She's the person where I'm like, 'Okay, I know it's possible.'

**What would you like to have achieved professionally five years from now?**
Putting out my own stuff. I feel like I'm in a place of confidence now where I'm excited to write, create, and produce. Not just on the screen, but behind the camera as well. I think there are stories that have been untouched or skipped over which need to be revisited.

**What's a dream role for you?**
I'd love to play the love interest in a rom com. I just feel there are roles that I've been 'soft-booked' for, and then they go back to producers and say, 'She's not thin enough, she's not light-skinned enough, she's not passing enough, she's not our idea of transness or blackness.' And I'm like, 'Have you seen my work? Have you seen my talent?' I know this is a business of many noes but I'm ready for more yeses. Let me show you the character I can become, rather than just be the token.



**Talia Ryder**
**'Steven Spielberg still watches and listens to everyone on set.'**

**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I was born in Buffalo but I grew up in New York City, went to Professional Children's School in the city, and I still live here now.

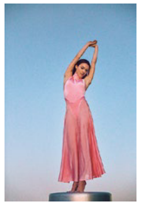
**How would your friends describe you?**
Probably crazy, but also very loyal.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
My first professional job was in *Matilda the Musical*, on Broadway. I remember watching it for the first time and being overwhelmed by how awesome I thought the show and the choreography were. It was the first time I wanted something *really* badly. I remember the day of my first performance as one of the best of my life.

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
I can't stop thinking about Emma Stone in *Poor Things.* She has such a bold personality that it's so crazy to watch her transform.

**Who has given you the best professional advice, and what was it?**
I'm lucky to have gotten a lot of different perspectives but not necessarily advice. I worked on Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* movie a few years ago, and I remember reading that Spielberg used to sneak onto film sets when he was little; his way of learning was just needing to be there, watching. When I worked on that movie it felt like going to film school, getting to sit and watch. Even as the greatest of all time, Spielberg still watches and listens to everyone on set – from PAs to crew to choreographers and dancers. And I feel like that's all you can do.

**What would you like to have achieved professionally five years from now?**
I really want to direct my younger sister Mimi in a film. She was with me in *Matilda the Musical* that time. And she's at film school right now. Actually, she's in *Mutt*, with Lío Mehiel.



**Lily McInerny**
**'If you're being perfect, then the audience won't feel anything.'**

**Where were you born?**
I'm from New York but I kind of moved all over the place in high school. I finished the last two years in L.A. and then ended up going to college in Vermont, at Bennington, which I loved. Having been raised in major metropolitan cities, I just figured, when else in my life would I have the excuse to, like, live in the woods?

**How would your friends describe you?**
They'd probably mention my sense of humour. That's the key to my closest relationships – an ability to laugh and not take yourself too seriously.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
I was Peter in *Peter and the Wolf* at a summer camp theatre. I was about eight years old and I loved it. When I was younger, I actually had stage fright. I still do to this day. I'm a relatively shy person, which is kind of ironic for the area of work that I've dedicated my life to.

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
Philip Seymour Hoffman. He's a huge inspiration. I just watched *Synecdoche, New York*, which is one of my all-time favourite movies. His performance in it is really breathtaking.

**Who has given you the best professional advice, and what was it?**
My high school drama teacher is sort of the reason why I started taking acting seriously. The most useful advice he gave me is this idea that vulnerability and risk are necessary discomforts to reach meaningful work. Audiences use actors as a conduit to feel their own stuff. If you're being perfect, then the audience won't feel anything. So the worst thing I can do as a performer in the moment is try to protect myself.

**What would you like to have achieved professionally five years from now?**
Work on a classic, like Shakespeare or Chekhov. That's definitely a bucket list moment for me. And I'd love to do more theatre. I did an off-Broadway play last year called *Camp Siegfried*, which was really exciting. It was about a German-American summer camp, based on a real place on Long Island leading up to World War II. It's about the rise of fascism and Nazism within the United States, which is this insane history that's often glossed over. It was really heavy but it had a dark comedic edge.

It's written by Bess Wohl and directed by David Cromer, who's one of my all-time favourite directors.

**What's a dream role for you?**
Ophelia in *Hamlet* or Nina in *The Seagull*. Theatre is physically exhausting, and I can't see myself doing multiple plays per year just yet. I always say that in an ideal world, I'll alternate between the stage and screen.

**Havana Rose Liu**
**'I feel like the mystery of life has given me a lot of gifts.'**

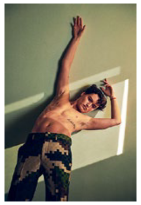
**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I'm from and live in Brooklyn. I went to Saint Ann's School, where Maya Hawke was in the year below me, and Lucas Hedges was in my year. When I did my first movie I called them for advice and they were really generous.

**How would your friends describe you?**
Sensitive, probably. And soft-hearted.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
Background work for a DKNY commercial, where we pretended it was summertime in the middle of winter. Emily Ratajkowski was walking around in a bikini and I was in the background pretending to be a tourist on top of a tour bus. It was so much fun.

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
I've been lucky to work with Rachel Sennott and Ayo Edebiri from *Bottoms* who I think are among the most talented actors of our generation. They're so quick, and lead with grace.

**What would you like to have achieved professionally five years from now?**
I never like to pre-plan too much; if I have a goal post, sometimes I feel like I'm not as open to the serendipity of other opportunities. I feel like the mystery of life has given me a lot of gifts, so as much as I can I try to point my compass out into the unknown.



**Lío Mehiel**
**'I think a transmasculine Joker would be the ultimate outsider.'**

**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I'm from New York. I'm Puerto Rican and Greek. I lived in Puerto Rico until I was five, grew up in New York City, and now I pay rent in L.A. But my partner and my mom live in New York, so the women I love are here.

**How would your friends describe you?**
Annoyingly earnest. My partner would probably describe me as soft but intense. My spirit animal is a koala. I like to rest and cuddle, and koalas sleep 23 hours a day.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
I was a child actor for a short period of time. I was in two Broadway shows as a kid. The first one was *The Miracle Worker*, where I played the understudy for Helen Keller, and Hilary Swank played the miracle worker in question. I remember seeing Hilary Swank in rehearsals chugging 50 vitamins down with water. The physical aspect of the show was intense. I remember feeling all of the emotions that were pent up in my body finally having a place to go because this character couldn't articulate herself with words, and so moaning and vocalization and kind of cathartic movement was all she had. As a ten year old, I was like, 'Oh my God, this is what I need to be doing.'

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
Robert Pattinson is so good in *Good Time*. His performance is raw as hell and weird and unpredictable. I find that he's able to capture on-screen the physicality and wild abandon that people are able to capture on stage. He has this way about him that's almost like Jim Carrey, but it's for dark arthouse films, which I love.

**Who has given you the best professional advice, and what was it?**
Eric Kohn, who ran *IndieWire* for 15 years, told me recently that Robert Pattinson was out finding people he wanted to work with at South by Southwest and Sundance; that's how he found the Safdie brothers. Eric's like, 'You need to be doing that.' If I wait around, it's like one out of every hundred parts, whereas if I meet people, they might write for me. As an actor, I'm available to play any gender. I made my debut in *Mutt*, in which I got to play the fullness of my identity – mixed ethnicity, transmasculine and bilingual.

**What's a dream role for you?**
By the time they remake *Joker*, I think I'll have aged into that part. The Joker's story feels like an interrogation of white masculinity, and I think a transmasculine Joker is the ultimate outsider, and adds a social commentary that digs a little deeper into that story.

**Josiah Cross**
**'My dream role is to play someone who historically was hated.'**

**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, and live in Los Angeles.

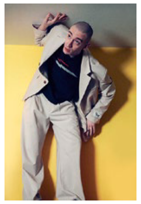
**How would your friends describe you?**
Unpredictable.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
I played a drag queen in a play called *Angels in America*. I had nerves but it was the first time I was like, 'Oh, yeah. I love this.' And because the subject matter was so raw – and considering how important the eighties were to New York City – it was the first time I felt responsible for the heart and spirit of the audience. It was like, I'm doing this for something bigger than myself. When you're in that type of exchange, it's important that you keep yourself, but you remove yourself at the same time. Let Josiah just be like a vehicle to get this thing across.

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
Mahershala Ali and Naomi Harris in *Swan Song*. He's dying with cancer, so he pays for this procedure where he clones himself because he needs to make his wife think he's fine. It's a great take on that *Terminator* or *RoboCop* sci-fi thing that we've seen a thousand times. It was done in a way where it's like, 'Okay, what if you were dying but you didn't tell your wife?'

**Who has given you the best professional advice, and what was it?**
I spoke with [director] Alma Har'el about what longevity means in this business. For an actor specifically, you kind of fall into a situation of going from job to job without establishing any footing for longevity. That made me think about what I'm choosing to do, why I'm choosing to do it, and how to move forward by doing that.

**What's a dream role for you?**
I really love Joaquin Phoenix, and he's got *Napoleon* out right now. I think my dream role is to play someone like that, who historically was hated. And how can you still make that person someone who the audience can somehow sympathize with, empathize with, evoke emotion from. I feel like it would really test my ability.



**Théodore Pellerin**
**'Watching Mia Goth shooting a really violent stabbing scene from, like, five metres away… I felt it!'**

**Where were you born and where do you currently live?**
I am from Montreal and I still live in Montreal. But I don't hate America!

**How would your friends describe you?**
A little anxious. Probably nice things, too, but I'm not going to say them.

**What was your first experience on stage or on screen?**
I was 16 and it was for this daily TV show in Quebec. We were shooting extremely quickly and it was big chunks of text. Having to perform in front of a crew was constantly terrifying, but it made me work on getting comfortable and allowing myself to just live the moments. You know, the outside eye brings so much weight that you have to kind of learn to get rid of it.

**Which actor's performances inspire you the most?**
I loved Mia Goth in *Pearl* and in *X*. I did a few days on a movie with her, and the first day I got there I was watching her from behind shooting a really violent scene where she's stabbing someone. Watching that from, like, five metres away… I felt it!

**Who has given you the best professional advice, and what was it?**
[Casting director] Deb Aquila told me, 'An actor has to read all the time.' It's true. Reading is an exercise in acting that everyone has access to. The last thing I read is *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is extraordinary.

**What's a dream role for you?**
Well, that's actually why I was reading *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I was asked to do a radio show in which I explored three acting parts that I would dream of playing. So firstly there is *Hamlet*, just because it is such a poetic masterpiece and a huge challenge. And then there is *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I'd love to play Blanche *and* Stanley because they're such opposites. I'm drawn to Blanche because she's a character who's on the verge of the abyss, but sexuality and life and perfume and clothes are how she gets through it; she covers things up, and she just wants to live. And then there's Stanley who's just like a vital and brutal force who is violent, completely animalistic and instinctive. They're very different but equally fascinating archetypes.

Interviews by Jennifer Venditti.

# ‘Before Armani, the Oscars was not about fashion.’

**Long before the red carpet became an industry, the Academy Awards were known as the ‘Armani Awards’.**

By Marta Represa

© Getty Images

1978

Diane Keaton

1989

Michelle Pfeiffer

1990

Billy Crystal

Michelle Pfeiffer

Tom Cruise

Julia Roberts

Denzel Washington

Jessica Tandy

Dan Aykroyd

Jodie Foster

1991

Jeremy Irons

Jodie Foster

1992

Tom Hanks

Daryl Hannah

Laura Dern

Jodie Foster

Anjelica Huston

1993

Jodie Foster

Billy Crystal

Rita Wilson & Tom Hanks

Al Pacino

Denzel Washington

Gene Hackman

Neil Jordan

Martin Brest

Rob Reiner

1994

Glenn Close

Steven Spielberg

Johnny Depp

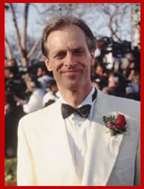
Liam Neeson

Rosie Perez

Leonardo DiCaprio

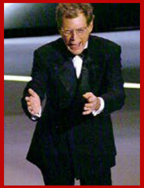
Emma Thompson

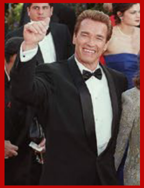
Bruce Springsteen


Keith Carradine

Gabriel Byrne

1995


David Letterman


Arnold Schwarzenegger

Robert Zemeckis

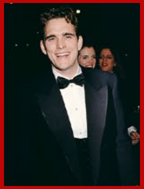
Annette Bening

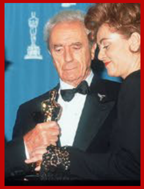
Gary Sinise

Chazz Palminteri

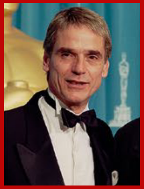
Jodie Foster

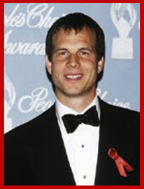
Robert De Niro


Matt Dillon


Michelangelo Antonioni

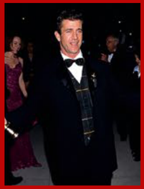
Sam Neill


Jeremy Irons


Bill Paxton

1996

Mira Sorvino


Mel Gibson

Sharon Stone

Mike Figgis

Michael Radford

Kevin Spacey

Emma Thompson

Ed Harris

Quincy Jones

Tom Hanks & Rita Wilson

Martin Landau

Pierce Brosnan

Salma Hayek

Robert Zemeckis

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Steven Spielberg

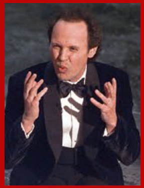
Lyle Lovett

Liam Neeson

Jeremy Irons

1997

Jodie Foster


Billy Crystal

Woody Harrelson

Milos Forman

Geoffrey Rush

Cuba Gooding Jr.

Edward Norton

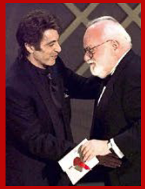
William Macy

James Woods

Kevin Spacey

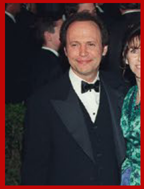
Mel Gibson

Gregory Hines


Al Pacino & Steve Martin

1998

Anjelica Huston


Billy Crystal

Lawrence Bender

Greg Kinnear

Robert Forster

Faye Dunaway

Matt Damon, Robin Williams & Ben Affleck

Curtis Hanson

Spike Lee

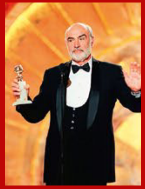
Stanley Donen

Djimon Hounsou

1999

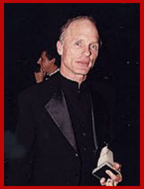
Sophia Loren

Arnold Schwarzenegger


Sean Connery

Eric Idle

Jeremy Irons


Ed Harris

Geoffrey Rush

James Coburn

John Madden

Bruce Paltrow

Matt Damon and Ben Affleck

Joaquín Cortés

Andrea Bocelli

**2000**

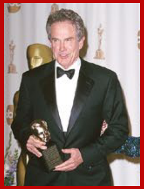
Billy Crystal

Kevin Spacey

Russell Crowe

Samuel L. Jackson

Annette Bening


Warren Beatty

Morgan Freeman

Chow Yun-Fat

Arnold Schwarzenegger

Frank Darabont

Pedro Almodóvar

Michael Caine

**2001**

Ashley Judd

Russell Crowe

Steve Martin

Benicio Del Toro

Joaquin Phoenix

Samuel L. Jackson

Ang Lee

Geoffrey Rush

Ed Harris

Javier Bardem

Cameron Crowe

Ben Affleck

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Benjamin Bratt

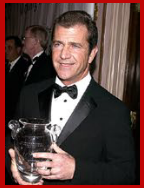
**2002**

Julia Roberts

Jodie Foster

Russell Crowe

Denzel Washington


Mel Gibson

Benicio Del Toro

Sidney Poitier

Kevin Spacey

Robert Redford

Tom Wilkinson

Samuel L. Jackson

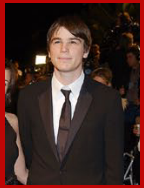
Nathan Lane

Donald Sutherland

Sean Astin

Sean Bean

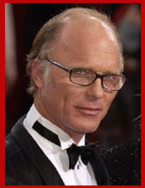
Blair Underwood


Josh Hartnett

**2003**

Mira Sorvino

Steve Martin


Ed Harris

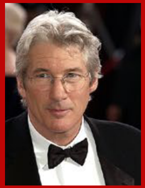
Christopher Walken

Chris Cooper

Martin Scorsese

Pedro Almodóvar

Dante Ferretti


Richard Gere

Denzel Washington

Diego Luna

Michael Cunningham

Cuba Gooding Jr.

**2004**

Julia Roberts

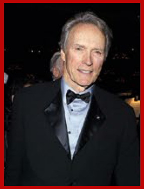
Sean Penn

Johnny Depp

Tom Cruise

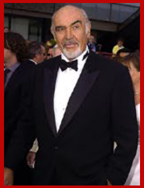
Benicio Del Toro

Billy Crystal


Clint Eastwood

Tom Hanks

Robin Wright Penn


Sean Connery

Owen Wilson

John Travolta

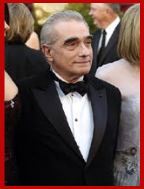
Diego Luna

**2005**

Annette Bening

Clint Eastwood

Clive Owen


Martin Scorsese

Sean Penn

Al Pacino

Adam Duritz

Beyoncé Knowles

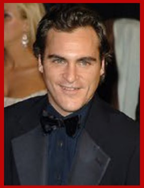
John Travolta

Jeremy Irons

Adam Sandler

Raoul Bova

**2006**

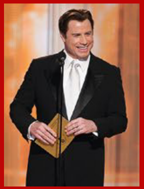

Joaquin Phoenix

Ziyi Zhang

Paul Haggis

Keanu Reeves

Ludacris


John Travolta

Three 6 Mafia

Jack Nicholson

Kevin Zegers

Chevy Chase

© Getty Images

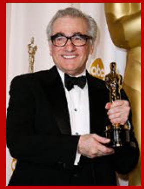
Russell Crowe

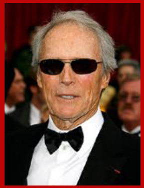
**2007**

Cate Blanchett

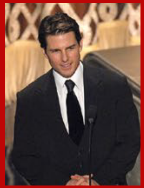
Leonardo DiCaprio

Mark Wahlberg


Martin Scorsese


Clint Eastwood

Beyoncé Knowles


Tom Cruise

Clive Owen

John Travolta

Michael Sheen

**2008**

Jon Stewart

George Clooney

Johnny Depp

Jason Reitman

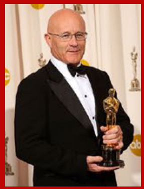
Andrea Jublin

Kristin Chenoweth

Harrison Ford

**2009**

Anne Hathaway


Kim Ledger

Sean Penn

Robert De Niro

Liam Neeson

Kevin Kline

Steve Martin

Anil Kapoor

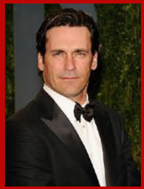
Sophia Loren

Alicia Keys

Emile Hirsch

Kate Ledger

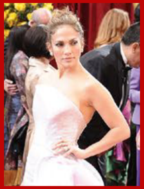
Josh Hartnett


Jon Hamm

Chace Crawford

© Getty Images

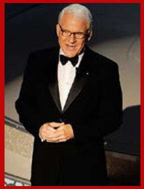
**2010**

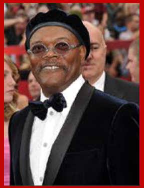

Jennifer Lopez

George Clooney

Jeremy Renner

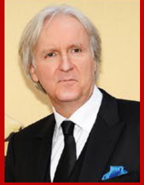
Christoph Waltz

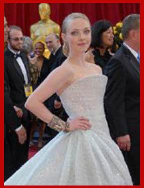

Steve Martin


Samuel L. Jackson

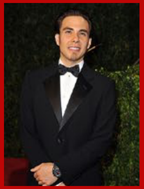
Sean Penn

Robin Williams


James Cameron


Amanda Seyfried

Lawrence Bender


Apolo Ohno

Adrien Brody

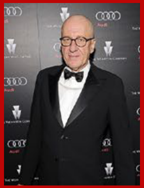
Cory Monteith

JC Chasez

Jordi Mollà

**2011**

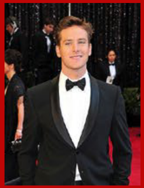
Reese Witherspoon


Geoffrey Rush

Aishwarya Rai

Mark Wahlberg

Anne Hathaway


Armie Hammer

Celine Dion

Billy Crystal

Anne Sweeney

Abhishek Bachchan

Elsa Pataky

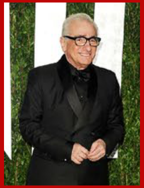
**2012**

Billy Crystal

Penélope Cruz

George Clooney

Ellie Kemper


Martin Scorsese

Dante Ferretti

© Getty Images

Tom Cruise

Martin Short

Simona Ventura

**2013**

Denzel Washington

Jessica Chastain

Robert De Niro

George Clooney

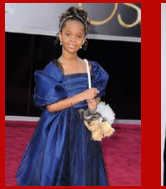
Tony Kushner

Naomi Watts

Paco Delgado

David France

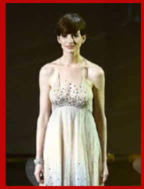
Samuel L. Jackson


Quvenzhané Wallis

Robert Downey Jr.

Russell Crowe

Richard Gere

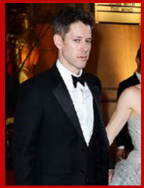

Anne Hathaway

Mark Wahlberg

Liam Neeson

Paul Rudd

Suraj Sharma


Darren Le Gallo

Sean Hayes

**2014**

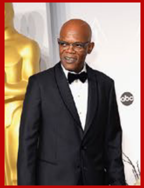
Cate Blanchett

Leonardo DiCaprio

Martin Scorsese

Paolo Sorrentino

Robert De Niro


Samuel L. Jackson

Harrison Ford

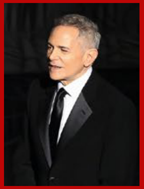
Jamie Foxx

Sidney Poitier

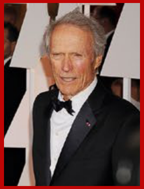
Anne Sweeney

Neil Meron

© Getty Images


Craig Zadan

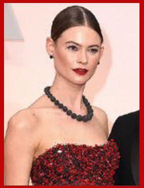
## 2015


Clint Eastwood

Naomi Watts

Morten Tyldum

Damián Szifron


Behati Prinsloo

Chris Pine

Sean Penn

Liam Neeson

Adam Levine

Neil Meron

Damon Wayans Jr.

Cheryl Boone Isaacs

## 2016

Leonardo DiCaprio

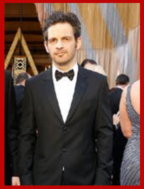
Cate Blanchett

Russell Crowe

Naomi Watts

Chadwick Boseman

Jacob Tremblay


Géza Röhrig

Charlotte Rampling

Forrest Goodluck

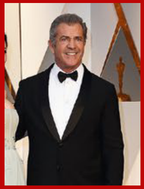
Diane Warren

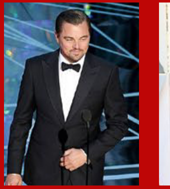
Taylor Kinney

Cheryl Boone-Isaacs

## 2017

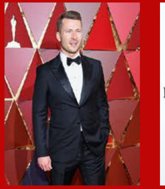
Denzel Washington


Mel Gibson


Leonardo DiCaprio

Nicole Kidman

Keith Urban


Glen Powell

Jovan Adepo

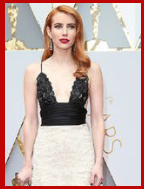
Cheryl Boone-Isaacs

© Getty Images

Aldis Hodge

Isabelle Huppert

John Cho


Emma Roberts

## 2018

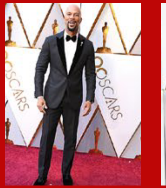
Denzel Washington

Sally Hawkins

Richard Jenkins

Guillermo del Toro

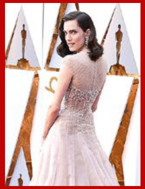
Nicole Kidman

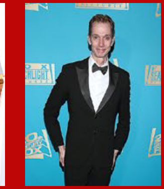

Common

Benj Pasek

Bryan Fogel

Armie Hammer


Allison Williams


Doug Jones

Claes Bang

Chris Messina

Elizabeth Chambers

## 2019

Sam Rockwell

Serena Williams

Ben Hardy

Gwilym Lee

Graham King

Leslie Bibb

Tomasz Kot

Samuel L. Jackson

Gustavo Dudamel

## 2020

Renée Zellweger

Leonardo DiCaprio

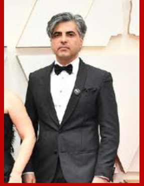
Martin Scorsese

Al Pacino

Robert De Niro

Bernie Taupin

© Getty Images


Feras Fayyad

Anthony McCarten

Lin-Manuel Miranda

Sebastian Maniscalco

Laura Dern

Jay Baruchel

Colin Jost

Tony Hale

**2021**

Tyler Perry

Kris Bowers

Ben Proudfoot

Erik Messerschmidt

Amanda Seyfried

Joshua James Richards

Will McCormack

Glenn Close

Renée Zellweger

**2022**

Benedict Cumberbatch

Nicole Kidman

Adam McKay

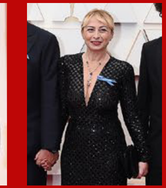
Nyle DiMarco

Saniyya Sidney

Samuel L. Jackson

Robert De Niro

Keith Urban


Daniela Sorrentino

Gustavo Dudamel

Roberta Armani

**2023**

Brendan Fraser

Nicole Kidman

Ke Huy Quan

Brendan Gleeson

Margot Robbie

© Getty Images

Samuel L. Jackson

Joseph Kosinski

Winnie Harlow

Felix Kammerer

Santiago Mitre

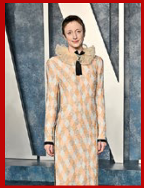
Keith Urban

Channing Tatum

Michelle Yeoh

Regé-Jean Page

Finneas


Andrea Riseborough

Josh Beauchamp

Laura Dern

Felix Kammerer

Bernie Taupin

Sara Sampaio

© Getty Images

On 28 March 1990, two days after the 62nd Academy Awards had taken place, *Women's Wear Daily* ran an article titled 'The Armani Awards'. 'Most of the big-time stars,' it boldly declared, 'dumped the glitz and opted for Giorgio's greatest hits.' Those stars included Kim Basinger, Robert De Niro, Steven Spielberg, Julia Roberts, Jodie Foster, Denzel Washington, Steve Martin, Tom Cruise, Jeff Goldblum, Dennis Hopper, Daryl Hannah and Billy Crystal, to name only a few. 'The star of the night,' the article concluded, 'was Michelle Pfeiffer, who kicked off Armani-mania last year with an androgynous suit, but this year went for a sleek navy column.' Yet in many respects, the true star of the night was Mr. Armani himself.

A decade after the parade of nonchalantly chic greige suits worn by Richard Gere in 1980s hit neo-noir thriller *American Gigolo* had first put the Milanese brand on the Hollywood map, Giorgio Armani was now crowned king of red-carpet style by Tinseltown en masse. It was the culmination of ten years of relationship building by a small team connected to both the movie and fashion industries, which had successfully taken stars out of worst-dressed lists straight into the best-dressed while providing flawlessly constructed tuxedoes for men and gowns – and tailoring – for women. A decade of Armani establishing a new sartorial paradigm, in which red-carpet 'costumes' gave way to a more natural kind of European elegance suited to the wearer's personality. All conducted from Armani's pioneering Rodeo Drive-based VIP dressing office.

Those 'Armani Awards' in 1990 also opened a new chapter for a brand whose influence in Hollywood would grow exponentially over the following 30 years – Armani has since been worn to the Oscars more than 500 times. While other houses were barely starting to wake up to the full potential of the red carpet, the label founded by the Piacenza-born designer was already dressing the pick of Hollywood for awards and events all over the world. Fast-forward to today's rampant red-carpet industry – in which every major luxury brand vies for the attention of cinema's biggest stars – and Armani remains both ubiquitous and synonymous with an unwavering elegance and glamour.

For *System*, Mr. Armani, along with key longstanding members of his VIP dressing team, as well as leading celebrity stylist Elizabeth Saltzman (whose own career in fashion started as an 18 year old at Armani) agreed to trace the origins and evolution of Armani's singular presence at the Oscars. From the 'New Hollywood' revolution and friendships with the likes of Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola to industry competition and the Pygmalion-esque appeal of the fashion designer, they all unpack a pioneering Hollywood story.

**The beginning of Armani's rapport with the Oscars and red-carpet dressing dates back to the late 1970s, at a time when Hollywood's historical studio system had given way to a new generation of younger, free-spirited filmmakers often labelled as 'New Hollywood'. Had the film industry's relationship to fashion and clothes also shifted?**

**'I wanted to express the spirit of 'New Hollywood' through clothing, and seeing actors as people, instead of distant, unapproachable deities.'**

**Mr. Armani, Chairman and CEO of the Armani Group:** The moment in history that saw the emergence of 'New Hollywood' corresponded to a general shift in the Western way of life. I was aware that society was undergoing a profound metamorphosis, and that impacted my vision. Of course, it wasn't a developed idea per se at that time, but rather a desire to capture the spirit of the time and express it through clothing. That would go on to include Hollywood and film stars, too. I was interested in seeing actors as people, instead of distant, unapproachable deities.

**Describe red-carpet style back then.**

**Mr. Armani:** Theatrical and flashy. It was as though actors continued to play a role, even in their real lives.

**Pantaleo Dell'Orco, Head of the Men's Style Office:** Menswear on the red carpet was very much in line with men's style at the time: generally quite rigid and subject to lots of rules. It felt quite ready to be superseded.

**Elizabeth Saltzman, stylist and Armani team member 1984-1992:** At the time, the Oscars was not about fashion. It was an interesting night, but no different to watching the Miss America pageant. Nolan Miller, Arnold Scaasi or Bob Mackie were the designers synonymous with Hollywood. It was all evening dresses designed by designers who weren't really selling in regular stores; or designed by the same people who did costumes for Carnival in Rio or who did Broadway; or the costume designers who worked on Hollywood movies. Givenchy was an exception, because he had a muse in Audrey Hepburn. And so Armani signalled a change, a shift in the Awards' rapport with fashion, certainly European houses.

**Mr. Armani:** I thought a more natural and personal style was needed off-screen, to be more closely aligned with actors' on-screen work. 'New Hollywood' stories and characters revolved around ideas of realism and continuity between cinema, performance and life. It was a new way of storytelling and expression. How could that not seep into fashion and style?

**And then *American Gigolo* happened.**

**Mr. Armani:** Yes. To my great surprise, [director] Paul Schrader contacted me and came to Milan in late July 1979 with John Travolta, who was initially hired to play the main character, Julian Kaye, before Richard Gere took the role. I showed him sketches of the Spring/Summer collection and he told me it was exactly what he had in mind. This is a point I'd like to make clear: the clothes worn by Richard Gere were collection clothes, not clothes designed specifically for the film. Richard Gere represented a modern man, and the modern men who identified with him could dress just like him.

**Pantaleo Dell'Orco:** The way we approached it was to dress Richard Gere just like a customer who had come to the store to change his image and wear Armani. The modernity lay in the relationship that the clothes had with the body, which, rather than being hidden, was always present. Add to this the choice of colours – a range of neutrals and greiges instead of traditional blues and anthracite greys – and you got a look that was unheard of at the time.

**Mr. Armani:** That's also when I first visited Hollywood, and my first time on a movie set. Seeing a film being made was a dream come true for a cinephile like me. I found it so exciting, witnessing that ability to transform a story into visual expression.

**Roberta Armani, Global Head of Entertainment Industry Relations:** Interestingly, *American Gigolo* was never intended as a marketing exercise, yet it turned out to be exactly that. It really brought Armani to the world through the big screen. From then on, the brand became closely associated with the movies. To date, we've designed the wardrobe of over 250 films.

**'Jodie Foster won Best Actress wearing a sky-blue gown with a huge bow. I turned to my husband and said, 'Next year, I'm dressing her in Armani.''**

**But Armani red-carpet dressing had actually debuted two years earlier.**

**Roberta Armani:** Exactly, and it all went back to that idea of rejecting old Hollywood's theatrics in favour of a more natural style. In 1977, my uncle had admired Diane Keaton's performance in *Annie Hall*, in which she famously wore 'what she wanted to wear'. He was taken with her style in the film, so he suggested she dress the same way for the Oscars in 1978. She won the Best Actress award wearing a man's jacket. No actress had ever dressed like that at the Oscars before.

**Mr. Armani:** It really wasn't a strategic choice; it was absolutely spontaneous, almost accidental. However, after *American Gigolo*, I realized the powerful impact that cinema could have on the collective imagination, and the desire to identify with a character's style. From there came a structured strategy with commercial goals.

**Wanda McDaniel, Executive Vice President Entertainment Industry Communications Worldwide:** Mr. Armani was smart. He had loved film ever since he was a kid, and he saw Hollywood as a key way to bring his work to the world's attention, so he started developing strong relationships with the new generation of actors and directors. He subsequently became the go-to designer for red-carpet events for those who wanted to make a more contemporary statement.

**Roberta Armani:** Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, they all wanted to look a little more relaxed on the red carpet to reflect the times they were living in.

**Mr. Armani:** I also bonded quite naturally with Martin Scorsese. His Italian origins, plus the perfectionism we both have in common, probably helped us have a very fluid dialogue that has continued over the years.

**Wanda McDaniel:** You could sense it – there was a new mood in town. Also among the women, who were tired of overstatement and wanted something more refined.

**The Armani VIP dressing office in Los Angeles opened in 1988. How did the idea for that come about?**

**Wanda McDaniel:** When I first met Mr. Armani, in 1987, I was working as a fashion journalist for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. Maria Shriver told me he was looking for someone to help him open his largest store in the US to date, on Rodeo Drive. She had been tipped off by [her aunt] Lee Radziwill, who was then working as special events coordinator. I immediately thought it was the perfect job for me. I was married to film producer Al Ruddy, who made *The Godfather*, so I moved in circles where I knew industry people, actors, studio executives, directors, and producers. And of course, Mr. Armani already had a relationship with people like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, as well as Brian de Palma who he had worked with on the wardrobe of *The Untouchables*. I sat on the boards of places like the Women's Guild Cedars-Sinai and the [Cayton] Children's Museum, I was mixing with just the sort of clientele Armani needed to attract so that the look would trickle down, or rather trickle out, into wider society. The introductions were initially made through social events. It was a very Italian approach.

**Mr. Armani:** Wanda was already working in film; her contacts and strategic personality immediately convinced me she was the right person to handle our relationship with stars in the city. To this day, I think I've been proven right.

> **'I watch Mr. Armani walk into rooms and people practically bow, out of the respect he commands and deserves. They do the same for… the Pope!'**

**Wanda McDaniel:** As I remember it, the idea suggested itself organically; it was a concept hiding in plain sight. The relationship between Armani and Hollywood had been developing in a very natural and unforced way for a while, so we came up with the idea of creating a specific VIP dressing office in L.A., even though terms such as 'VIP department' had yet to be established in our arena of work. When it opened in 1988, Mr. Armani tasked me to become his 'Hollywood ambassador', thus pioneering the area in the entertainment world. My husband and I attended the famous Swifty Lazar Oscar-watching party in 1989. All of the glittering dinner guests commented on the garish attire on the red carpet. That's where the idea was born – when Jodie Foster won Best Actress wearing a sky-blue gown with an overwhelming bow in the back. I turned to my husband and said, 'Next year, I'm dressing her for the Oscars.' When I called Jodie to congratulate her, she told me she bought that gown straight out of a store window in Milan! She didn't like it, and admitted that fashion was not her forte. 'From here on out,' she said, 'just tell me what I'm wearing.' At the 1990 Academy Awards, Jodie indeed wore Armani, *WWD* dubbed the Oscars 'The Armani Awards', and the rest is fashion history.

**Elizabeth Saltzman:** It was the perfect storm: Armani was doing what nobody else was doing, organized in a way nobody else was, hiring all the right people, at just the right time. The clothes were structured yet fluid, which no one else was providing, and they were getting people out of uncomfortable and into comfortable. Men's suits on women. But always with ease.

**Barry Frediani, Vice President of Entertainment Industry Relations:** In 1990, I was newly working at the Rodeo Drive location after two years in retail as the Armani specialist in the Armani shop-in-shop at the I. Magnin department store. The doors of the Armani boutique were constantly revolving with celebrity appointments, both in the VIP showrooms and on the shop floor. I recall being impressed with 1990 Oscars host Billy Crystal being fitted by Mr. Armani himself. Mr. Armani was in Hollywood to attend the Oscars, and it was a true learning experience to watch him work.

**Elizabeth Saltzman:** Other brands were, at most, taking a bungalow at Chateau Marmont for a fortnight during awards season while at Rodeo Drive, you had Wanda and Barry: people who were part of the film world, who had their ear to the ground, knew what was going on. It was smart.

**Was there a clear idea from the start about what a film star should look like dressed for the red carpet in Armani?**

**Pantaleo Dell'Orco:** It was all about modernity. The stars who wore Armani represented the present day.

**Mr. Armani:** I have always had my own idea of elegance, whether day or night, which I have adapted to the red carpet by working closely with the personalities I dress, and talking to them. For me, the person I dress is always more important than the clothes they wear.

**Roberta Armani:** It was about creating a moment for a star. Like Julia Roberts dressed in a grey suit with a shirt and tie for the 1990 Golden Globes. Or Jodie Foster moving in a year from the worst-dressed list to the best-dressed list at the Oscars when my uncle took her under his wing and fitted her personally. She won an Academy Award in 1992 for *The Silence of the Lambs* wearing a white suit that my uncle designed, outshining all those wearing ribbons and trains. It was the same for Sharon Stone, who at the Academy Awards in 1996 looked majestic in a long black velvet Armani coat, or more recently, Cate Blanchett, who is so powerful with her aura of restraint and sophistication.

**Mr. Armani:** Not every star needs a Pygmalion, but having one can perhaps help to avoid any missteps. Honestly, though, I don't see myself as a Pygmalion; I'm simply someone who can suggest a style in which the dress literally disappears and what you really remember is the person wearing it.

**Wanda McDaniel:** By the early nineties, Armani was dressing so many people that it really became a thing. Often stars approached us, rather than the other way around.

**Elizabeth Saltzman:** Interestingly, Halston had his girls, and Armani had his, but somehow Armani crossed over. Even though they got all these different people who you weren't expecting, you always knew it was Armani.

**Wanda McDaniel:** We were, of course, aware that Armani had become a kind of benchmark, which was flattering, but nothing really changed for us. We stayed true to our determination to dress people who we admired and liked, and who genuinely liked the design and aesthetic of Armani.

**What was the first hint that things had entered a new era, in terms of the scale and competition from brands trying to secure deals with Hollywood stars?**

**Wanda McDaniel:** It started to feel a little different at the turn of the century; designers had understood the power of the red carpet, and had seen how successful Armani had been in this area.

**Roberta Armani:** I started formally working in entertainment-industry relations in 2000, after dreaming of being an actor myself for a couple of years, which meant I had experience with the movie industry. Things have definitely changed over the past 20 years; they were changing even before then. I can't remember an obvious turning point, until the rise of digital and social media, which without question has had a huge impact on the red-carpet 'industry'. Those images are now around the world instantly, on everyone's phones.

**Wanda McDaniel:** The opportunity is greater, but the stakes are also higher if you get it wrong.

**Roberta Armani:** While witnessing these changes, we've stayed true to our own principles. We keep working with celebrities and VIPs who genuinely like what we do. Otherwise we wouldn't be authentic. And neither would they.

**Wanda McDaniel:** People are wise to things that feel contrived or false, so the star and the brand really need to align.

**Roberta Armani:** It's not about simply trying to promote the brand in any way possible. We look for genuine relationships with people who are close to the brand's aesthetics and philosophy. Take Cate Blanchett, for instance: my uncle spotted her early on in her career as a very talented actor who also possesses incredible poise and a calm spirit.

**What do Armani's red-carpet operations look like today?**

**Wanda McDaniel:** We're not only Hollywood-centric, but we're on high alert during Oscars season. It's logistical, yet intensely personal. The people we dress are always old friends – or new ones – and we want to do the best we can for them. Armani has become a byword for red-carpet dressing not because we have a strategy, but because we are helpful and do our best to make people look great. So they come back.

**Barry Frediani:** We prepare for the Oscars months in advance, before nominations are announced. There are red carpets from the first week of January until the Oscars in March that require a lot of planning and ordering of custom tuxedoes. We meet with costume designers, publicists and agents for strategic placements of Armani.

**When it comes to red-carpet dressing, what does Armani represent today?**

**Elizabeth Saltzman:** From the get-go, the secret to Armani's red-carpet success was that the brand offered pure elegance. It wasn't 'fashion'; it was chic. There was no mistake on the red carpet, and who wouldn't want to feel secure in that way? To this day, I agree with that. Looking at clothes in general nowadays, I often wonder where the hell are the clothes? Show us some elegance! And that's exactly what Armani delivers.

**From the actors' perspective, what does Armani represent today?**

**Elizabeth Saltzman:** I actually discussed this with a client today. I want to say this: when I put people in Armani it's not for a pay check. I just believe that there are moments when you need to celebrate iconic people. I asked Armani to make something for Jodie Comer, because I thought, 'You know what, there's a sense of wanting to pay respect to the maestro.' It's important and I think it's a rite of passage for youth, because you don't know how long the legends are going to be around for. He's done it all, and is *still* doing it, and has never handed his business over. And with Armani today, it's not about 'cool'; it's about excellence. It's a label that transcends cool. That's the key.

**Pantaleo Dell'Orco:** Of course, it's not the nineties any more, but I think our timeless style, which is both highly natural and elegant, is still a winner in a world that has become so noisy.

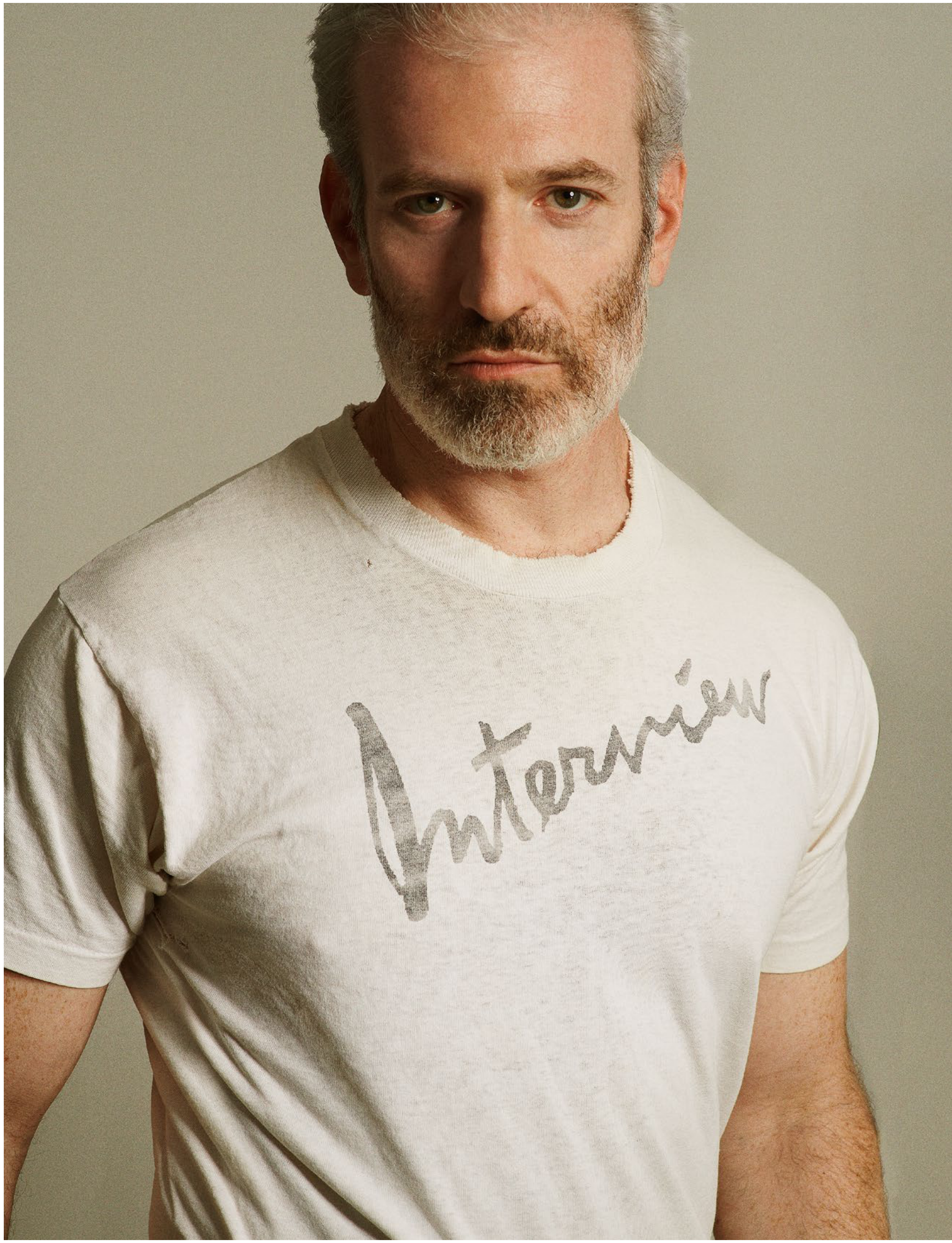
**Mr. Armani:** The relationship between fashion and entertainment is now closer than ever, and brands promote primarily via the personalities wearing them in the public arena. I myself do not shy away from this strategy, but I do not believe it should be the only way to communicate a brand's values. That way, we risk flattening our work by equating it to that of costume designers for celebrities. The truth is that clothes are also objects and part of our everyday life.

**Elizabeth Saltzman:** Ultimately, that self-assurance and quality commands respect. To this day, I watch Mr. Armani walk into rooms and people practically bow. It's an expression of the respect he commands and rightly deserves. They do the same for… the Pope!

# ‘If Warhol were alive today, you couldn’t keep him off TikTok.’

For *Interview*’s editor-in-chief Mel Ottenberg, celebrities – both A-listers and ‘niche maniacs on the internet’ – are his medium.

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield
Portrait by Heji Shin



Mel with Kim Kardashian, July 2022.

Photo: Nadia Lee Cohen

Mel Ottenberg was born to edit *Interview* magazine. Since his appointment in 2021, he has injected a much-needed double-shot of Warholian sass and downtown attitude into the title's bimonthly print edition and digital platforms. With the mood of the mag now pitched somewhere between #obsessed and droll *whatever*-ness, it seems that every major celebrity is queuing up for their cover shoot (routinely styled by Ottenberg himself). Kim Kardashian? Tick: 'In a jockstrap, with her butt out, in front of the American flag.' Lana Del Rey? Tick: cigarette dangling out of her mouth, and interviewed by Billie Eilish. Austin Butler? Photographed taking a shower and vacuuming John Giorno's untouched loft on the Bowery ('I mean, what could be more *Interview*?'). Delve inside the pages of any issue and you'll find a veritable roll-call of TikTok stars, fly-by-nights, freaks, chancers, and old-timers. It's a heady high-and-low party. It's *Interview* at its scrappy best.

## 'Where else are you going to get Kim Kardashian in a jockstrap with her butt out, in front of the American flag? If not in *Interview*, where?'

Ottenberg's storied career in publishing and fashion reads like the perfect résumé for the gig. Emerging as an editorial stylist in early 2000s lower Manhattan, his signature off-kilter sexy aesthetic offered a subversive, self-aware take on a mainstream culture in which everyone, including the subject, was in on the absurdity of modern-day celebrity. Ottenberg quickly earned a roster of high-profile clients including Rihanna, Barbra Streisand, and Justin Bieber. In 2018, after having cast his all-American eye over European subculture at *032c* magazine, where he had been fashion director since 2013, Ottenberg was appointed creative director of *Interview*. The magazine was being reborn from the ashes of a particularly catty (and public) legal demise, and Ottenberg became a new figurehead for a new chapter for a new era.

As with any great media venture in tune with the zeitgeist, *Interview*'s current success is partly down to its deft understanding of the technology of the times. 'It's no coincidence that *Interview* came out at the same time [1969] as the small cassette recorder,' the title's circa-1970s editor Glenn O'Brien, once explained. Fifty years on, Ottenberg's version of *Interview* is a perfectly frenetic reflection of the technology driving social mobility today, chiefly TikTok's blink-and-you-miss-it, everyone's-a-star infinite scroll. In fact, Ottenberg's own social-media activity perhaps best encapsulates the essence of what makes the new *Interview* so essentially *Interview*: on-set selfies with his A-list cover stars; playing Pac-Man at Corey Feldman's in Hollywood; learning Italian with La Cicciolina in Milan; quizzing A$AP Rocky on his room-service habits while sitting front row at Gucci; asking his own 99-year-old grandma, Shirley, her opinion of *Interview* ('nasty'); and handing out copies of the (sold out and super in-demand) Lana Del Rey cover-story issue to adoring fans in Washington Square Park.

*System* recently caught up with Ottenberg in (where else?) his local Sixth Avenue diner. Clad in his signature uniform of double-denim, aviator jacket and dad sneakers, he discussed the legacy of Warhol, his particular take on what brands want from celebrities, and why Hollywood is such a scary place.

**You're roughly the same age as me. Growing up in the UK, our generation was enthralled by the glamour of America's cultural dominance at the time: Prince, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Nike, Michael Jordan, *E.T.*, *The Goonies*, John Hughes movies, the Space Shuttle, the arrival of McDonald's, even the seemingly (at the time) benign presence of Ronald and Nancy Reagan… How did you experience all these things as a kid growing up in the States? Did it feel like a golden period?**
*Total* golden period! For me, it started in 1983 when I was seven years old. I'm coming home from school, sticking on the radio and hearing 'Thriller', 'Lucky Star', 'Borderline', 'Like a Virgin', 'Purple Rain'… Hearing all those iconic new releases in real time, and learning about culture and style through the dawn of MTV, was incredible. I mean, I could have watched MTV for 24 hours straight if given the opportunity. Because of it, pop stars were really having to up their game when it came to putting their style and their shit out into the world. Also, in America at the time, you had local TV stations showing syndicated '70s sitcoms, which educated me about the aesthetics of that era; stuff that I've gone on to love in my adult life.

**What about magazines?**
An early big memory is seeing Madonna on the cover of one of those teenybopper magazines – I can't remember what the magazine was called, like *Top Hits* or something – it was a picture of her on the top-left side of the cover; she's got those early-'80s Boy George dreads. Those little details were so important to

me. I was really into the music, but I was also really into the gestures, the clothes, and the outrageousness.

**You grew up in Washington, D.C.; how did that shape your understanding of American politics? With Reagan, the former Hollywood actor, as the US President at the time.**

It was just sort of the local economy. My parents weren't in politics, but it was definitely discussed at the dinner table. I don't think I thought it was that exciting or glamorous. I totally wanted to be from somewhere else.

**Did you have your eyes set on New York from a young age?**

Well, I have a very clear memory of being 13 years old and reading *The Andy Warhol Diaries*…[1]

## 'Mom's hairdresser said to me, 'A child shouldn't be reading *Interview*. It's trash, it's pornography.' And me thinking, '*Really*? Seems kinda cool to me.''

**Pat Hackett's book?**

Yes, it's so good, I've read it like four times. I remember reading all the naughty bits about celebrities behaving badly, and cocaine, and Studio 54, and thinking to myself, 'Oh, so nothing is wrong with me after all.' At the time I was getting bullied at school and stuff, but reading the Warhol diaries made me realize those bullies were just fucking idiots, so one day I said to myself, 'I'm going to move to New York, do drugs, find fashion, and it's all going to be totally fine.' And it was.

**Was Warhol a big deal in general for you?**

He died in 1987, when I was 11, so there was a fascination with him. My dad took me up to New York on the train to see the retrospective show at MoMA[2] when I was about 13. I really responded to the Marilyns, the Elvises, the car crashes and all that stuff, and my dad bought me the catalogue, which I still have. And I got into *Interview* around the same time, too.

**Am I right in thinking your parents worked in magazines?**

Yes, my mom and stepfather had a company in D.C. called The Magazine Group, from the late '70s to the mid-2010s; they created custom publishing, which was like branded content before branded content. Things like magazines for Washington lawyers or airline magazines, stuff that I never found cool or interesting at the time, but today I find it incredible given the branded content stuff I'm doing at *Interview* – the Dior cover with Lana Del Rey, or the Bottega Veneta cover with Kim Kardashian. I actually think those are my two best covers of *Interview*. And they're also, you know, advertisers. So maybe I soaked all that up from my folks, through osmosis.

**What was the first fashion magazine you really responded to?**

American *Vogue*. I remember Anna Wintour's first issue, with the jeans on the cover.[3] I would read every single word in *Vogue* – or *i-D*, *The Face*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and of course *Interview* – about fashion, because that was my only way in; there was no Internet. I needed to read everything to understand the vibe that was going on.

**Was music a conduit into fashion for you? Were you a goth, a metal fan, or a pop fan?**

I was never one thing nor another. I was into Madonna, Guns N' Roses, The Cure and Siouxsie and the Banshees all at the same time, but I was never hanging out with the metal kids or the goths. I was never part of any tribe. I just felt like some fucking weird kid on my own, by myself.

**So, you weren't drawn to any particular scene?**

I was drawn to the Washington, D.C. club scene, which was super wild. I'd sneak out, take acid, get a cab to the southeast side of D.C., which was the dangerous part of town, and go watch the drag shows. I'd end up just staring for hours at all the amazing people in the clubs. I got a lot out of that. I loved it.

**When did you move to New York?**

In 1998, after college. I worked at this incredible furniture store in SoHo called Moss, and went out every night.

**When did you first start thinking about a career in fashion?**

I had always wanted to be a fashion designer. My goal was to be like Marc Jacobs. I went to school for fashion design, and in the summers I interned in New York for Richard Tyler, a really 'in' brand in the '90s which is now totally forgotten, and then for Marc Jacobs. Then I got a job as a trim guy at the brand Katayone Adeli[4] which was very popular when I was there in 1999. My job was to get the trims together, like the thread, zippers and buttons. I was like, 'Oh my god, I don't want to be a fashion designer anymore! I can't deal with this! What I need is a job where I'm doing one thing one week and then

Photo: Brianna Capozzi

Mel with Miley Cyrus, June 2021.

Mel with Lana Del Rey, January 2023.

something different the next, and I'm always working with groovy people. But I don't know what that job is, and I'll probably never find it. I'm doomed!' And then I realized what I was describing in my head was actually called styling. But I never thought I was fancy enough to be a stylist.

**How were you dressing at the time?**
I was trying out makeup and outlandish clothes, but I never looked good in fashion; I'm not skinny enough or extreme enough for it. I went through a big '70s period, which is questionable, but then I figured out, 'If I dress in more classic clothes – Army & Navy, denim, thrift-store – I am attractive, and will get laid.'

**Have you got a most-treasured piece of clothing from those early years?**
A brown vintage T-shirt that says 'OUTLAWS' on it. I cut it up and resewed it to look really slutty on me. I'd wear it out at night, looking to get laid. It was in the first editorial shoot I ever styled, in *The Face,* shot by Matthias Vriens. He just said, 'Why don't you do the styling like your own style, in slutty cut-up T-shirts?'

> **'I'd sneak out, take acid, get a cab to the southeast side of D.C., and go watch the drag shows. I'd end up just staring for hours at all the amazing people.'**

**And that was your first editorial?**
Yeah. I didn't know how or who to call to get any clothes. I didn't know what a showroom was. I had never assisted anyone. So I called the stylist Lisa Marie Fernandez and just said, 'Hey, I'm doing a shoot with Matthias next week for *The Face*. I'm so excited, but how do I call clothes in?' And she said, 'Oh, that's weird, I was supposed to be doing that shoot.' I was thinking to myself, 'Oh my God, I'm calling this stylist for help and now I'm taking her job. She's going to hate me!' But she was just like, 'Here's what you do: call this number for the Helmut Lang press office, and this number for Gucci…' It was a really good lesson in the importance of staying elegant and cool when you don't get a job or whatever, and not to get all savage about that kind of stuff.

**Who was the first celebrity you worked with?**
In 2003, not far into my career, I started styling Courtney Love. It was through a mutual friend of ours. It was really crazy, and I wouldn't say it was very successful.

**What Courtney era was that?**
This was like the whole next-level, drug debacle, tabloid front-page era. She took me to Japan for some event she was doing, and we went shopping and she showed me all these amazing stores. It was actually very interesting, and I should add that I really like Courtney. That same year, I also did Asia Argento, who was directing the film *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, an adaptation of a J.T. LeRoy[5] book, which starred Winona Ryder, Michael Pitt, Marilyn Manson and Peter Fonda. I had no idea how to cost anything, but I was working with all these stars.

**Was it a period piece or contemporary?**
I don't even know how to describe it. I mean, it barely got any distribution, but there was a real mystique around J.T. Leroy. So when I subsequently met Steven Klein and told him I'd worked on this movie that was a J.T. Leroy adaptation by Asia Argento, he started booking me for covers – without even seeing the movie — with people like Usher for *Vogue* or Hilary Swank for *Vogue Italia*.

**Did you find working with celebs more interesting than conventional models?**
I had a connection with the celeb stuff that models didn't bring. It was the pop culture side of it all that I was into.

**Describe your first 'pinch me' moment. A first time when you couldn't believe you were getting paid to do what it was you were doing.**
The very first advertising job I did was a Dior 'Midnight Poison' fragrance commercial, directed by Wong Kar-wai, in the Paris Opéra. Eva Green was the talent and John [Galliano] and his team were like, 'Oh, here are all the looks from all the couture shows. Just pick whatever you want and style it however you want; it's for a party scene in the opera.' And that's when I was like, 'I can't believe I'm here.' I *still* can't believe I was there.

**Describe your first cripplingly embarrassing moment in the business, when your inexperience revealed itself. And what did you learn from that?**
It was like my third *L'Uomo Vogue* cover with Steven Klein. It was a Diesel special and Anna Dello Russo called me to say, 'I need this to be, like, *really* FASHION.' This was before Diesel was even doing 'fashion', but she needed it to be really FASHION. Anyway, after it came out she called me again, being like, 'Man, I *hate* the cover! There's *no* style. There's *no* direction! There's no

blah blah blah blah.' And I was like, 'Oh my God! Like, first of all, how fucking iconic is it that Anna Dello Russo is calling to scream at me,' – because she is so major – 'plus, she's telling me that she hates what I did.' But at the same time, I was thinking, 'She's right. It's *not* fashion. You really should have thought harder about this because this could be your last opportunity in your career, and you just blew it.'

**You know that Malcolm Gladwell 10,000-hours theory, right? That to become an expert at something, you've got to put 10,000 hours of practice in, which amounts to about a decade. What specific thing do you think you've put your 10,000 hours into?**
I can really work with someone that I've never met before, or that I don't know well, to help guide the image we're making. Wherever we are, I can be trusted and dependable, and can really go there to make that thing happen, because of the zillion hours that I've put into doing exactly that.

**When you're doing that, do you have to turn it on, and play a heightened version of yourself, almost perform?**
Yeah, I have to turn it on, but it's natural. I'm often exhausted afterwards because, you know, dealing with personalities can be exhausting. But these days I can also connect with someone through interviewing them, as well as making the imagery with them, so I can kind of get something else out of them.

**Had you done interviewing prior to being the editor-in-chief at *Interview*?**
Not at all. I think the first interview I did was with [TikTok star] Addison Rae. But I love doing interviews. It's so fucking fun. It's probably my favourite thing to do at *Interview*. I just want to get people to have fun conversations, because some of them in magazines are so fucking boring. You know, you'll have this amazing picture of this amazing person, and then you've got a text which is dead on the page because it feels so media-trained. I'm just trying to create a vibe through a conversation, but without descending into that quagmire of fear that good conversations can bring up these days.

**Given that so many of the *Interview* interviews – whether done by yourself or by another celebrity – are around the notion of celebrity, done *with* celebrities, how much does that play on the way you approach it?**
Well, it's *Interview*, so it's all about the talent. You're going to the subject of the feature and entering into a conversation with them about who's going to be the best person to interview them. I mean, this is a completely thrown-out-there example, but the idea of Camille Paglia[6] interviewing Lana Del Rey sounds great, but Lana Del Rey isn't going to want to be interviewed by Paglia. I don't know if she has read her or not, but that just feels like some oil-and-water pairing. And I'm not saying that they wouldn't hypothetically be fab together, but I would say that it's kind of up to people's comfort, what they're up for or not.

**Who do you have in mind as the reader when you're putting *Interview* together?**
We're making the magazine that *we* want to read. We're not trying to be for everybody, and we're not trying to be for one particular person either. It seems like we're drawing kids in, which is great, but it's for anyone who feels like reading it.

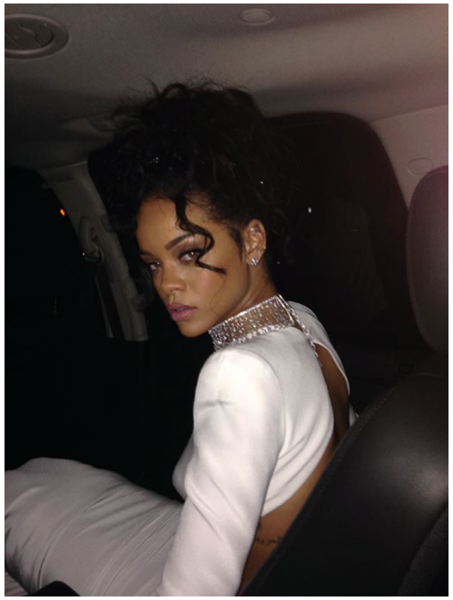
**The footage of you handing out free copies of the Lana Del Rey issue to kids in Washington Square Park is so fun.**[7]
That was such a profoundly amazing career high for me! I was just like, 'Okay, it's 11.30am. on Valentine's Day, and it's uncommonly warm out, so why don't I just go to the park and hand some magazines out. Like, what's the worst thing that can happen? Surely it won't be a total disaster. Fuck it. Let's just do it.' And so I talked into the camera and put it on TikTok and Instagram, and it got such a great reaction. It's a beautiful example of just trusting yourself with this gift that we're given, which is to be the custodians of this amazing legacy product, and just do what we think is right. And sometimes you're going to hit a real high, like that Lana moment in the park; meeting people who are like, 'I love the magazine, I love Lana, I love you.' And that makes me fucking happy.

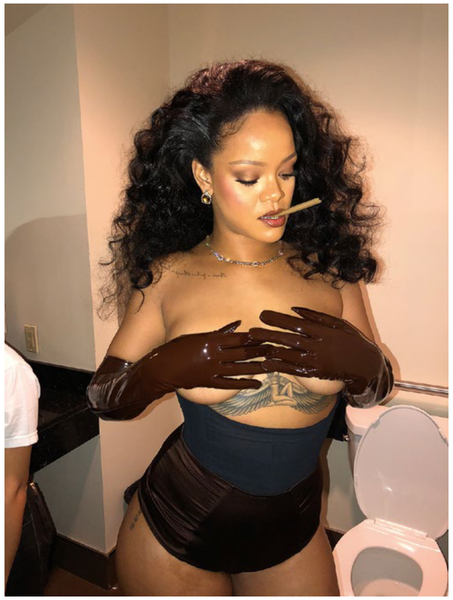
**Does the magazine's history, and that of Warhol himself, play on your mind? Are you constantly asking yourself, 'What would Warhol do in this instance?'**
This actually goes back to my first memory of *Interview*. I'm probably 11, Warhol has recently died; I am at the hair salon and my mom's hairdresser is cutting my hair. I pick up this issue of

> **'…and then one day I said to myself, 'I'm going to move to New York, do drugs, find fashion, and everything's going to be totally fine.' And it was.'**

Photo: Daniel Arnold

Mel with Austin Butler, July 2023.





Mel Ottenberg's iPhone photos of Rihanna, 2014-2018.

Mel with Olivia Rodrigo, June 2023.

Photo: Brianna Capozzi

*Interview* and the hairdresser says, 'Oh, *Interview* is so trash. You shouldn't be reading that. It's pornography, it's garbage, it's so bad. And Andy Warhol is dead.' I remember thinking, '*Really*? It seems kinda cool from what I can see here.' In that moment, the thing I understood was that *Interview* isn't for everyone, and it doesn't need to be. And that's what I still think about when I think about the history of the magazine.

**What were you responding to in *Interview* when you were 11?**

I was just thinking, 'These people are fucking cool!' But when you look back at those archive issues, what's so great is that some of the people in there are more iconic today than ever before, and then there are others who no one's ever heard of again since. I fucking love that! They were just the people that the magazine was into at the time. So, it's like, don't be afraid to get it wrong. Just do what you think is a vibe. Because *Interview* at its best has always been kind of scrappy, which I love.

## 'I enjoy shaking my ass for this magazine, and being like, 'Right, Milan, let's do some business, this is my fucking product right here. Wanna play or not?''

**Given the sheer presence of Warhol in today's popular culture, like the Netflix documentary series based on *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, how do you keep *Interview* from feeling retro?**

We're never trying to redo the past because, like, it's the past. I'll totally steal elements of Warhol, while always asking myself, 'How am I going to make this look cool and modern?' With the Austin Butler cover, for example, I was thinking, 'What are we going to do with him? He's so gorgeous. Okay, let's get Daniel Arnold to shoot him vacuuming.' It just seems like a fun thing, and it's a modern take on that Andy Warhol performance piece called something like '*Vacuuming in the gallery, 1972*'.[8]

**What do you think makes a great *Interview* cover?**

A great subject, at the right time, and with something… *pow*! I think that it *used* to be all about a close-up portrait, but now I think it's more about the right gesture. Also, if not in *Interview*, where? Where else are we going to get Lana in a wedding dress and blue eyeliner, with a cigarette dangling out of her mouth? Or Kim Kardashian in a jockstrap with her butt out, in front of the American flag? And by the way, I *really* wasn't sure people would like either of these covers. I mean, the Kim Kardashian one got so much hate, which is fine because, you know, viva hate! You've got to let people hate your shit sometimes, and I think the real key to *Interview*'s success is not trying too hard.

**Which living celebrity do you yearn to style and shoot for the cover?**

I would say Britney Spears, Timothée Chalamet, Beyoncé… I think Sylvester Stallone needs to be in *Interview* again. He did it years ago, but I want him in it again. Britney's my number one though.

**Why her in particular?**

Everyone loves her, yet she's complicated. The way she presents herself on social media is, I think, one of the most interesting things in the world that we live in. I hope that 200 years from now, when people are studying our civilization, they'll be looking at Britney's Reels, because I think they speak to the crumbling of America. I'm not saying the crumbling of *her*, but the way she presents herself within America at this time. I am fucking obsessed with it, I love it. I am serious, and sometimes people don't like me saying this, but I really do feel that way.

**Have you read her book?**

Not yet, it was supposed to come five days ago from Amazon! One of my first jobs ever was assisting Britney's stylists, Kurt and Bart, for her *I'm a Slave 4 U* performance, when she had the yellow snake. It was a jungle theme, and there were all these crazy back-up dancers who I styled, which was very glamorous.

**Bob Colacello, who I've interviewed about his tenure as *Interview*'s editor in the '70s, often talks about being sent out by Warhol to go sell ad pages and secure commissions of society portraits, to keep the cash rolling in. Given that Warhol famously said, 'Good business is the best art', what's your rapport with that side of your editorship?**

I love doing all the brand meetings, especially the ones in Milan. I particularly enjoy it during the shows because I'm just so fucking *move, move, move* and I'm ready to rumble. I enjoy shaking my ass for this fucking magazine, and being like, 'Right, Milan, let's do some shit together, let's do some business. This is my fucking product right here. Do you want to play or not?' I think all that's really fun.

**Talking of overused Warhol quotes, what do you make of the one about everyone**

**having their 15 minutes of fame?**
Well, it's more like *five* seconds of fame today. I mean, TikTok's so insane, you can be entertained by this shit for days. I really think Hollywood's in trouble, baby. And I think if Warhol were alive today, you couldn't keep him off TikTok.

**What would he be posting?**
He'd be live-streaming this interview, and filming that guy over there in the corner eating his burger, and then filming the waiter, and then that guy going into the bathroom. He'd be sharing the perfect movie of his life.

**What was the first thing you remember seeing on TikTok that made you think it was going to be a game-changer?**
Addison Rae, in 2020, dancing nonchalantly in a bikini in the pool. I remember thinking to myself, 'Holy shit, America's got a divine new product! It's perfect timing because we're all desperate for something new. The world has changed, and like, this chick is onto something, and all she's doing is looking hot, dancing on TikTok. And as for Instagram? I don't even remember what that is…'

**'Fashion shows need this obnoxiously high level of celebrity, just to make some sense. Like, if you can't believe in x, y or z brand, believe in Kylie Jenner.'**

**What do you think about TikTok's ability to make an unknown into a star?**
I've always had a passion for niche maniacs on the Internet. And I feel like TikTok is the most Warholian thing ever, with all these non-famous people doing the same monotonous things over and over, and getting 10 million views. The kids don't care about Hollywood anymore; they care about meme stars and TikTok stars. It's the future. We've probably featured 20 TikTok or Instagram personality types in *Interview* this past year, and I hope we do more than that in 2024. I also hope that part of the social-climbing status for these TikTok kids is the idea of being featured in *Interview* magazine.

**Who have you loved on TikTok?**
Okay, let me give you a few examples. In 2020, there were all these gorgeous boys living together and partying in this house in California they called 'Sway House'.[9] It looked like trouble, and I was like, 'I really think we need to shoot a story on them.' So, me and Eli Russell Linnetz – one of the photographers who I feel understands me, and who also does really edgy shit, too – went to Sway House, and we shot them. I was nervous, because the behaviour in that house looked totally psychotic from what you could tell from their TikToks, but it really, really worked. More recently though, there's Alix Earle, a girl who was a senior at University of Miami, just doing TikToks of her life, like, 'Get ready with me', 'I'm so hungover', 'This is my disgusting apartment.' And she just broke through.

**How did you first hear about her?**
It was from one of the kids at *Interview*. Oh, no, no, no! Alix Earle was actually *my* idea because I'd gone out for dinner with Emily Ratajkowski and my friend Cassie, and they were like, 'You *need* Alix Earle in your magazine right now!' And I'm like, 'Huh? Who the fuck's Alix Earle?' And then they show me her, because they're like geniuses of the Internet, and I was like, 'Oh, she's hiding in plain sight, with a zillion followers.' So we got her in *Interview* before she'd broken through, and now she's fully broken through. There's this other TikToker, Kelon, whose character, Terri Joe, was wildly popular. Kelon does Terri Joe like a white Republican southern woman, and was doing all these TikTok LIVES, which were just really unhinged and fun. Madonna was on one, trolling all these people. It's fucking hysterical. And we were all like, we need Terri Joe in the magazine right now, it's absolutely essential! If enough people at the magazine are hot for a TikToker, it means something's up.

**Are today's celebrities better value for money than they were in Warhol's time?**
100%! And it seems like it's only getting bigger, and spiralling into this other thing, which I really noticed during the shows this season.

**In what way?**
Well, it often seemed like the shows were there mainly for celebrities to be wearing handbags.

**Is that a good or a bad thing?**
It just is what it is, right? This particular season [Spring/Summer 2024] was not a great moment in fashion history. And I think the world feels like it's spiralling off of its axis right now. So, the fact that fashion doesn't make so much sense this season is entirely understandable. That's not a criticism. It's just an observation. And so the one thing I think the shows really needed – and *every* single show got it – was this obnoxiously high level of celebrity, just to make some sense out of it. Like, if you can't believe in x, y or z brand, you can believe in Kylie Jenner.

Photo: Theo Liu

Mel with Kylie Jenner, October 2023.

Mel with Arnold Schwarzenegger, April 2023.

**In an era increasingly defined by scrutiny, judgment, division, and cancel culture, how does the unabridged 'keep-the-tape-rolling-and-print-exactly-what's-said' approach of *Interview* continue to fly without getting you into sticky situations? Warhol presumably got off on the idea of people saying scandalous or provocative things…**

Nothing's unabridged in *Interview* today, but that's more a question of people's reading habits and attention span having changed so much. Plus, I just want everyone to be in on it, and have a fun conversation; I'm not looking to trick anyone. But way beyond *Interview*, like, everyone in America is speaking in some sort of code right now. It's all so horrible, everyone speaking in this sort of false pious way in order to get their message across or, like, attacking their neighbour, you know, or just assuming that everyone is inherently evil. I think that a lot of the people who are doing a lot of the accusing are terrible. But at the same time, it's complicated because there are such terrible people who have been outed in the last decade, and there's been horrible behaviour for so long, with racial injustice and violence towards women. But somehow, because America is losing its way, and the government is losing its way, it's all headed towards some terrible conclusion, or certainly a lot more unpleasantness. That said, it is still an important time to *try* to have great conversations and make great images and create a place like *Interview* where those things can happen. There is a feeling of fear, hatred, and loathing in America right now that is behind every single fucking thing. I don't know if people are saying that openly or not, but I am saying it openly, because it's true.

## 'Hollywood is a scary fucking place. Being behind-the-scenes, working with celebrities – and I'm not naming any names – can be very *Game of Thrones*.'

**Do you find yourself personally on the receiving end of hostile comments about *Interview*?**

Honestly, right now, if you look at my Instagram, there's hundreds of really negative comments about me and my work. And that's fine. I've said it before: I love it when people love what we are doing, but sometimes we also think it's hysterical when no one likes what we're doing. Actually, going back to Bob Colacello. I met him for the first time a year ago. I was like, 'Hey, Bob, what's up? I'm Mel at *Interview*.' And he's like, 'Oh, hey, you know, I just hated that Kim production. It's so offensive. I was going to write a letter denouncing my affiliation with *Interview* magazine because I find it so disgusting.' And I was like, 'Bob, I'm so glad we met, because now you can write that letter and address it to me personally, because I'll frame it and put it on my wall. I *love* that you hate it.' And then we became instant pals. You know what I'm saying? I don't take offence when someone doesn't like what I do, and I don't hate everyone who's hating on me.

**Have you had to learn to be thick-skinned?**

I don't know if I'm as thick-skinned as people think I am. It's important to adopt the attitude of, 'Whatever. They hate me today. Viva hate. Fuck it, who cares?' But it's also good to pay attention to what people feel because one big difference in the world now is you can read the digital room pretty easily.

**When Warhol was putting out *Interview*, do you think he was aware of the negative feedback? There were obviously no vitriolic comments on social media to scroll through back then.**

A really valuable thing to know about Warhol is quite how much the press despised what he was doing in the '60s. Just *so* much hatred for his art, so many savagely bad reviews of the culture that he had created. So I was reading some comments about me that were like, 'You've gone too far. Andy would be rolling in his grave if he saw what you were doing with *Interview*.' And I was thinking, 'I beg to differ.' But, you know, how would I know? I never met the man.

**Let's talk about Rihanna. You were her personal stylist for many years.**

I styled Rihanna from 2011 until 2018, when I first came to *Interview* as the creative director. Rihanna and I had an incredible collaboration going for a long time. She's amazing. One of the smartest, most brilliant people I've ever met. She really pushed me to constantly reinvent the fashion wheel, so it was hard. But really inspiring. And it was fun. Years before we worked together, I saw her *Rude Boy* video and thought to myself, 'Rihanna is the client I really need. She's the way to get ahead. That is my opportunity to really make my mark and get ahead in the fashion industry.' Because the traditional fashion scene was just so saturated with talented stylists and I was never going to get ahead that way.

**Was becoming a celebrity stylist your ambition?**

I honestly never wanted to be a celebrity stylist and I never even considered myself to be one. You'd have to be styling five different clients to really be in that 'celebrity stylist' ecosystem. I'm not saying that I wasn't working with a celebrity, but it was different.

**If someone asked you to explain what you role was with Rihanna, what would you have said?**
I would have said it was to excite her about fashion. I really created a monster with her fashion-wise because I gave her *everything*, every time I was working with her. It made her such a tough customer who wanted more, more, more. But that friction was amazing because it pushed me to do stuff beyond what everybody else was doing. Sometimes we'd be on the same page and sometimes not. But I feel like my job was always to make her feel like her best, her coolest, her most beautiful, every time she did anything. It was not easy, but it was cool. It was totally worth it.

**'To become a celebrity, be really good at what you do, whether that means being a great actor, or a great beauty, or a great toxic troll. Just go hard.'**

**It doesn't sound like it was all a breeze.**
It was never just a case of like, 'Hey, wear this.' It was more like, 'Which of my ideas does she think is *really* sick? Which of these things is going to make her really pumped for, like, the Met Gala? Maybe none of them. And then she's going to torture me with some other really great idea…' That happened all the time. At the end of the day, it was always a collaboration to get the thing to really *pop*. And if everyone else loved that, then great.

**Do you have a look or a moment that you look back most fondly on?**
There's the naked dress she wore in 2014, which was made by Adam Selman[10], who was my boyfriend at the time. It was incredible, with, like, nipples out. I love that because I just knew the reaction was going to be crazy. And then there's the yellow cape at the 2015 Met Gala.[11] I could never try to top that because, I mean, that's just the ultimate; it was truly influential to fashion. At the time people didn't really pay that much attention to the theme of the Met Gala when they were thinking about what they would be wearing. I feel like that Guo Pei look is given a lot of credit for really changing that, because that year the gala was in celebration of their China show [*China: Through the Looking Glass*], and Rihanna was the only famous person who wore a Chinese designer on that red carpet. That particular look was her idea. I just take credit for making the impossible happen.

**Impossible in what way?**
Well, it was hard to find the designer, hard to get that giant look shipped to New York, and then once we had it, it was a nerve-wracking struggle just to figure out how to get it up the red carpet since it was so huge and really, really heavy. There have since been many copies of that moment, and that silhouette, but at the time this kind of stunt was wholly unfamiliar. It was like, 'How the hell are we gonna do this? How is she going to pull it off and look cool walking up those steps with this gigantic heavy thing on?' There was also a lot of behind-the-scenes drama getting the whole look together last minute, but I'll save that for the memoirs.

**In an *Interview* interview you did with Law Roach, you said, 'I used to do celebrity styling. It can really fuck with your brain. And people are a nightmare.' Tell me more about this.**
Well, I would say that dealing with celebrities, no matter how wonderful they are, there's definitely going to be a side of it that feels like *Game of Thrones*. Cersei Lannister[12] said it best: 'When you play the Game of Thrones, you either win or you die.' There's always going to be a lot of people, a lot of business, and a lot of bullshit attached to celebrities, and often people with weird ulterior motives. I think Hollywood is a scary fucking place. I really do. And the behind-the-scenes of working with celebrities – and I'm not naming any names – can be very *Game of Thrones*. Still, I think seven years is a good amount of time to be working with someone.

**You got the celebrity seven-year itch…**
I just didn't want to really do it again. Maybe I *will* do another pop star again. I'm not opposed to it, but it would have to be the right thing.

**What do you know now about celebrity styling that you didn't when you started out?**
I would definitely say: it's not your show, it is their show, and you're there to work. You're there to make them feel good and there to do their bidding, and have them have the best experience. But I also want to remind you – and by the way, I don't take offence at all – but I'm really *not* a celebrity stylist. I just feel like celebrities are my medium.

**What would your advice to somebody hoping to become a celebrity stylist be?**
You need to be able to style a bunch of different celebrity clients all at the same time, and make them all feel like they're number one, while also making every brand feel like they're number one, too. And you need to keep churning it out *all* the time to always make these people look good. And you need to have assisted someone beforehand, because you need to learn the intricacies of the trade. Ultimately, just be a good stylist. And don't think that just because you dress cool and can be fun that that makes you a stylist. It truly doesn't. Like, you need to dress people in great outfits, you need to know fashion and know references, and understand hair and makeup, and know how to work with people. The key at the beginning is remembering that it's not about you.

**What did you learn about the life of a celebrity when you were working with Rihanna?**
It's a tough thing being a celebrity because there's so much negativity aimed at you. And because of that, you have to become really tough. So if I've learned one thing, it's that celebrities have got big fucking balls.

**What's your advice to someone hoping to become a celebrity?**
I have no idea. It's a great question, but I don't fucking know. I'm the wrong person to ask.

**Yet it's the most commonplace aspiration today, to become a celebrity.**
Okay, well I guess I would just say this: offer way more of yourself than is currently acceptable, and don't be afraid of everyone hating you. And finally, and probably most importantly, be really, really good at what you do, whether that means being a great actor, or a great beauty, or a great toxic troll. Just go hard.

1. In 1976, Andy Warhol began calling and dictating the previous day's events to writer Pat Hackett – initially, to maintain a record of Warhol's daily cash payments for his annual tax returns. *The Andy Warhol Diaries* ended up as an 807-page book, published posthumously in 1989, which Hackett had condensed down from an original 20,000-page diary spanning 11 years.

2. 'Andy Warhol: A Retrospective' ran at MoMA from 6 February until 2 May 1989. Spanning two floors of the museum, it featured 300 paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and films.

3. Reflecting on her first cover, Anna Wintour said in 2012 on vogue.com: 'Michaela was wearing an haute couture Christian Lacroix jacket with a beaded cross, all very 'Like a Prayer', and stonewashed Guess jeans. The jacket was actually part of a suit, but the skirt didn't fit Michaela; she had been on vacation back home in Israel and had gained a little weight. Not that that mattered. In fact, it only served to reinforce the idea to take couture's haughty grandeur and playfully throw it headlong into real life and see what happened.'

4. Katayone Adeli is an Iranian-born fashion designer based in New York. She ran her eponymous label from 1997 until 2003, and afterwards focused on collaborative projects. She was known for, according to *The Guardian*, designing the sexiest trousers in the world. In 2014, she was rumoured to be the next in line to take over as creative director at Helmut Lang.

5. J.T. Leroy was a literary hoax masterminded by the author Laura Albert. Everybody, including Asia Argento, was fooled. Speaking of the experience, Argento said she couldn't do movies as a director for 10 years after the realization. 'I didn't have a lot of self-esteem after that. It took me a long time to rebuild it. I was lost.'

6. Camille Paglia is an American academic, social critic and feminist, known for her books on art, sexuality, gender, and film.

7. After *Interview*'s March 2023 Lana Del Rey issue sold out, Ottenberg posted a video on social media announcing he'd be handing out a hundred copies to fans in Washington Square Park, to which many fans showed up.

8. As a take on Duchamp's urinal readymade, Warhol bought a vacuum cleaner in 1972, vacuumed an art gallery's carpet and then signed the dust bag as a record of what he'd done.

9. The Sway House was a collective of nine young, male TikTok stars living in an L.A. mansion, formed by TalentX Entertainment in 2019. Noise complaints were filed by neighbours, saying they could hear paintball shots in the morning, continuous 'chug, chug, chug!' chants, and sounds of poolside vomiting. In August 2020, the city of L.A. switched off water and gas to the mansion, as the Sway boys were not following Covid protocols when a birthday bash with 20 strippers was hosted, and no facemasks worn.

10. In 2014, Rihanna wore a see-through dress covered in 216,000 Swarovski crystals to the CFDA Fashion Awards. Rihanna's only regret with the outfit, she told *Vogue* in 2016, was that she did not wear a bedazzled thong.

11. Rihanna wore an imperial yellow, fur-trimmed cape by Chinese couturier Guo Pei to the 2015 Met Gala, which, according to the designer, took roughly two years to make.

12. In popular television series *Game of Thrones*, the fictional character Cersei Lannister was the twentieth ruler of the Seven Kingdoms and the widow of King Robert Baratheon.

# ‘I design my collections while I’m running.’

## Thom Browne tells *GQ*’s Will Welch about transforming his highly competitive sporting past into victory on the runway.

Portrait by Philip-Daniel Ducasse

Since its creation in 2010, the CFDA Fashion Icon Award has charted the place of fashion within the wider culture, honouring household names from Lady Gaga to Johnny Depp to Pharrell; figures from industries – pop music, Hollywood, fashion itself – where personal image is part of the profession. But in 2023, Serena Williams became the first winner from the world of sport, an arena which celebrates a different kind of achievement: superhuman ambition, supreme discipline, prodigious talent, year-on-year dominance. The award marks both a recognition of the monumental status of Williams herself, and the increasing alignment of sport and fashion. But for Thom Browne, handing Williams the prize in November in New York as Chairman of the CFDA, it was personal, too, linking two worlds that have shaped his own rise to global stardom. Fashion has made Browne's name, but sport is in his blood: as a child in an intensely sporty family; as a fiery young tennis player; as a college swimmer, up at dawn to train a minimum of four hours a day. And it's that drive that's also behind his rise through fashion: after trying to make it as an actor in Hollywood, Browne headed to New York City and worked in the showroom at Armani before serving as men's creative director for Club Monaco (at the time owned by Ralph Lauren). In 2003, he launched his own label, rapidly carving out a unique place in the menswear market with his signature shrunken tailoring: cropped trouser, shorts suits, slight gradations of mid-grey wool, often genderless. Collaborations with Brooks Brothers and Moncler followed, then an expansion into womenswear in 2012 – dressing First Lady Michelle Obama that same year at the presidential inauguration (womenswear now represents almost half of the Thom Browne business). In 2018, Browne sold 85 percent of his company to Zegna in a deal that valued the label at $500 million, and in 2023, the growth continued, as the designer marked 20 years in business with his first haute couture collection.

And then there's sport, and the brand's close ties with icons such as LeBron James, Lionel Messi and NFL star (and beau of Taylor Swift) Travis Kelce. Back in 2018, James and the rest of his Cleveland Cavaliers teammates arrived at their NBA playoff games in matching custom Thom Browne suits. The same year the brand announced a partnership with Messi's then-football club FC Barcelona. The subject of this feature's accompanying photoshoot, NBA star Russell Westbrook, has also cut a toweringly striking figure when wearing the designer's pleated skirts to New York Fashion Week and the Met Gala – effortlessly shifting the conventions of basketball style, menswear, and indeed masculinity. 'It gives me the swagger I need,' affirms Westbrook.

At the recent CFDA Awards, Thom Browne got chatting to Will Welch, global editorial director at *GQ* and editor-in-chief of *GQ* US, so *System* invited them to continue the conversation the following afternoon: on Serena, sizing, and the competitive spirit across sport and fashion in the US.

**'At school, I was in the pool by 6am. Two hours in the morning, two in the afternoon. Three times a week. And an extra hour in the weight room.'**

**Will Welch:** We saw each other last night and you said you have a lot to say about sports. What did you mean?

**Thom Browne:** My inspiration from sports is so personal to me, and I think it's a very non-fashion approach to having inspiration. But I think what I meant really stems from seeing Serena last night. For me, she's the most important female athlete, if not athlete, over the last 50 years, for her way of bringing fashion into her personal and professional life. She really showcased herself as an individual. For me, hers was the most important award that was presented last night, because she's the first athlete to win [the CFDA Fashion Icon award]. When athletes are going to their games you see the fashion that they really champion and the individuality in their choices. I thought it was time for an athlete to be celebrated for that.

**Will:** It is perfect for this moment when athletes are driving so much of the fashion conversation. And when I talk to retailers, they're driving sales, too. In Serena's speech last night, she characterized herself as an individual, and it seems like she knows how to use fashion to express that.

**Thom:** She wanted to bring her individuality to a whole sport, as the new face of tennis. Most of the time you just see players in their sports clothes. She played in her fashion, and I'm sure some of the things that she was wearing were probably not the most comfortable things she could have chosen.

**Will:** She definitely painted outside the lines of what you're supposed to wear for tennis.

**Thom:** She re-energized the sport. I think the new generation are great players, but they don't have that thing that drew you to watching her. She revolutionized tennis in so many ways, both for men and women, by being a true individual ready to take a chance, which is so rare. She was such a cultural moment. Similarly, I think LeBron James in that grey suit was a cultural moment; the Cleveland Cavaliers team was a cultural moment.[1]

**Will:** Before we get further into professional athletes, I want to talk about your own relationship to sports. I know that you were a competitive swimmer, but before that, when you were a kid in Allentown [Pennsylvania], were you playing other sports as well?

**Thom:** I swam competitively from the age of six, and I played tennis through high school. But then for college I had to choose. I was actually a better tennis player than I was a swimmer, but my father wanted me to stick to tennis, so I chose to swim. That's the type of kid I was.

**Will:** Why do you think your dad preferred tennis? Could you have played college tennis?

**Thom:** I don't know. I think my dad hated sitting in auditoriums, with the echo and all that chlorine. He was always very kind of stressed, and he never took his coat off for some reason, so he was always warm. Maybe he saw that I was a better tennis player, but tennis at that level is very lonely. You are always on your own. With swimming, I had a team and I had some friends; with tennis, I didn't have that.

**Will:** That gladiator aspect of singles tennis is so incredibly intense.

**Thom:** People don't realize the schedules that they have. I think people now know more because of reality shows and the Tennis Channel, so they see that there's a tennis tournament every week. People thought there was only Australia, France, Wimbledon and the US open.

**Will:** Just the four slams! How do you think that past connects to what you do now? As the designer of Thom Browne, when you think back to those times, what jumps out? Perhaps a feeling of nostalgia, the loneliness of tennis, the uniform, the equipment elements…

**Thom:** All of it. Sometimes the reference is a little more literal, but when it comes down to it, my approach to work in general and in design is about that rigour, almost about competing with myself. 'This collection needs to be better than the last.' There's always that competitive side to me. The literal references to sports are personal to me, and I like them because they're not normal, boring fashion inspirations and I feel like they're relatable. As conceptual as an idea may be, if there's a reference to a tennis ball, but the tennis ball is a round sphere that somebody has on their body, people get that reference. They think it's crazy, but there's that little bit of understanding of where it's coming from, as opposed to a conceptual idea out of nowhere that just totally alienates a lot of people. Although I like doing that, too.

**'My approach to design is all about rigour. Competing in sports has now turned into competing at work, and almost competing with myself.'**

**Will:** Yes! I've felt alienated at a Thom Browne show before. Where am I? What is going on? [Both laugh] So when you do a tennis collection, for example, would you say the references to your own experience as a tennis player are more literal or less literal?

**Thom:** Less literal. It's more like referencing Suzanne Lenglen from the 1920s,[2] more a nostalgic and idyllic reference to tennis. Hopefully referencing the past, then making it relevant for today, which is what I always try to do.

**Will:** To what extent do you think Thom Browne is about you and your experience?

**Thom:** It's all about me, in a way. I mean, it is my life, it's what I do. So as foreign as it might seem from me, it's still so much part of me. Everybody says my shows are as they are because I'm an actor, but their theatricality has nothing to do with my wanting to be an actor. The ideas are all things in my head that I want to put out in the world. They come from a real place; it's not something contrived.

**Will:** I like this idea that if you do a tennis collection it's not about you as a kid playing tennis, but it is about you in the sense that it's all through your filter.

**Thom:** If I did a tennis collection that was truly personal to me, there would be 500 broken tennis rackets.

**Will:** Did you have temper issues?

**Thom:** I had the worst temper. I am usually very calm and I actually do not have much of a temper, but for some odd reason, if you put me on a tennis court it would just trigger something almost uncontrollable.

**Will:** Maybe that's why you turned up the dial on swimming.

**Thom:** I always used to win, too, so it wasn't like I was losing. I remember this one time I won a match and I was out of control and I went to take the kid's hand and he said, 'I did not deserve that.'

**Will:** He didn't deserve the beating?

**Thom:** He didn't deserve having to endure my energy. Which is pretty bad.

**Will:** I had the opposite problem. I struggled to be competitive enough to get really good. Tell me about swimming in college at Notre Dame. I remember feeling a lot of sympathy for the athletes at college because it was such an extraordinary commitment to compete at that level.

**Thom:** For all four years at school I was up at five thirty to get to the pool by six. Two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon. And three times a week, I'd do an extra hour in the weight room, too.

**Will:** But from what I know about the way you organize your life, you like schedules and rigour. Did the intensity of that itinerary suit you then, too?

**Thom:** It was just such a part of my life. I remember the last time I swam in my senior year thinking, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I never have to dive into a pool ever again.'

**Will:** What was the emotion that accompanied that thought?

**Thom:** I was so burnt out. I was so happy. But then I had all that free time, so I started running just to have something else. I ran twice a day: in the morning and in the afternoon. Without sports, I wouldn't really know what to do with my free time. The thing about swimming is that if you don't make it to the Olympics, you've just wasted so much time in your life. Of course, you learn the lessons of discipline, but that's really all you get, as opposed to sports in which you can become a professional athlete.

**Will:** My understanding is that the running is something that you continued for quite a long time.

**Thom:** I still run. Not twice a day, but usually a little over an hour, around eight miles, any time of day, seven days a week, although I try to take a day off. I very rarely miss it. It clears my head. I design collections while I'm running; just thinking through what I want to do, ideas that I want to bring back to my design staff.

**Will:** Maybe this is a weird question, but do you think of your running as sports or as exercise?

**Thom:** Exercise, because I'm never competing. I do sometimes think it would be odd to compete in a sport again. I don't know how that would feel. I almost don't remember the feeling of competing in a sport. It was such a part of my life, but then I couldn't wait to not have to compete. In a way, it's turned into competing at work.

**Will:** How has your running uniform evolved? My early years at *GQ* were your early years doing Thom Browne, and I remember the cashmere cardigan as part of your running attire.

**Thom:** Yeah. That was a little bit stylized, a little bit of theatre. I don't really run in cashmere. Although if I'm going to the gym and running inside, I do wear it to the gym. We do a fashion version of sportswear; it's not like we do wear tests on things.

**Will:** Do you remember why you came to bring sportswear into the mix? Even if it isn't meant to be performance and you're not worried about wicking materials and all that stuff.

**Thom:** It's always a personal thing; if I want it for myself, then I usually think that it'd be interesting to infuse it into the mix, like, next to a $6,000 cashmere coat. If it's a part of me, it should be in the world of Thom Browne.

**Will:** What's the story behind the Thanksgiving game, which I believe started in 2014?[3]

**Thom:** Growing up within a family of seven, we always had a football game on Thanksgiving Day. So I thought it'd be nice for our family here to put on our sweats and create the game. It started in Central Park.

**Will:** Are you the best athlete of the Browne kids?

**Thom:** No, we all were pretty good. My brother played professional baseball for the Texas Rangers. My sister swam with me at Notre Dame; we overlapped on the team. My little sister scored over 2,000 points in college basketball. And my little brother played a bit of professional football in England.

**Will:** Incredible. That was serious Thanksgiving warfare!

**Thom:** Competitive, and we were all pretty good at it too.

**Will:** And thus a little bit dangerous.

**Thom:** Which is good. Somebody would usually get hurt, usually break something. And of course, as a stubborn Irish family, somebody would be pushed into the bushes once in a while.

**Will:** Any injuries in the Thom Browne version of the game so far? Has anyone gone down?

**Thom:** No, it's pretty tame.

**Will:** You hosted this fabulous dinner at The Grill the other night, and obviously you're going to choose a restaurant in New York that feels like an appropriate context for your vision. But what is it like for you when you look out across the tables and see people from all different worlds wearing your clothes? Your world has come to life on all these different characters. How does that feel as a designer?

**'If I were to design a tennis collection that was truly personal to me, there would be 500 broken tennis rackets. I had the worst temper on the court.'**

**Thom:** It feels great! Sometimes people feel like what we do is not for them, and I don't understand that because I put clothing on so many different types of people. I just don't understand when people say, 'Oh, I don't know if I could wear it.' There's so much within the collection that is very understandable, very wearable, very classic, very simple. And people sometimes see those exact pieces just happen to be on Lil Uzi and they think they can't wear it.

**Will:** Like, it's not the forehead tattoo that's making him pull this off.[4]

**Thom:** After LeBron and the team were wearing the clothing, I thought we were going to have throngs of men going down to the stores. But – zero! Which was fine, because it wasn't a marketing thing in my head; I wanted it to be more of a cultural thing. Same thing with the First Lady[5]; when she wore our clothes, I thought every woman in the world was going to come, but they didn't.

**Will:** One thing that's interesting about having built a very specific world over 20 years is that there's always a play between really pure classicism and an extreme re-imagination based on proportion. And I think the word 'extreme' is fair. For me, one of the things that you have done so successfully is to use athletes' bodies to show that the proportion holds when you scale way up. I remember standing on the rooftop last year in Paris, thinking 'Serge Ibaka looks perfect in these clothes.' He was wearing a vest and – do you call it a kilt?[6]

**Thom:** A skirt.

**Will:** He was wearing a vest and a skirt and he looked perfect. And Serge has an immense, unusual physique. So we've seen everyone from Jenna Ortega to Serge Ibaka and Russell Westbrook. And your proportions hold. But when people say to you, 'I still don't get it,' do you think your eye no longer registers the extremity? What do you think is going on there?

**Thom:** I think it is that it's become normal for me, in a way, but I think that the challenge in the next 20 years is to never lose that. Because I think I will always want people to see that it's for a lot more people: it's for somebody like Serge or Russell, and it's for someone like Jenna Ortega; polar opposites. But fundamentally everybody wants to see the four bars and the red, white, blue grosgrain, or the white, red, white, blue, white grosgrain.

**Will:** Let us not erase the trim.

**Thom:** But I would most likely be known for the proportion – the plain proportion – because that's really where it started: the proportion of the top and the bottom. And that can be adjusted for anybody's size. The thing is, I do want to get it out there in as big a way as possible; I think there is still so much more to do. We just came from Asia and we are still so niche; $500 million into this business, and we're still so niche. So even just by opening people's eyes that this is actually for them, there's a huge potential in regards to what could happen.

**Will:** Why is it exciting to you to basically push it as far as possible, versus being in a comfortable zone? You've built a really sizable global business. In many regards, you have achieved scale. But what you're talking about is the possibility of scaling further. Why is it your impulse to continue to push it?

**Thom:** I guess it comes down to my competitive side. And, really, just why not? Why stop here? Without taking away from the first 20 years, why not build upon them? I sometimes think there's nothing worse than seeing something that has kind of fallen flat. I would love to just keep things evolving and moving in a really positive way that doesn't take away from what it's built upon.

**Will:** And we're Americans – we're into growth.

**Thom:** Well, speaking as the Chairman of the CFDA,[7] it is our responsibility to the next generation of American design and fashion. My biggest challenge to all these young kids is to do it, to really want to do it. All of them. They are talented. It's just that you have to make it happen.

**Will:** What do you mean by that, that you have to kind of make it happen? What's the spirit behind that?

**Thom:** No one's going to make it happen for you. Everyone wants advice. Everyone wants the secret formula. There's no secret formula.

**Will:** 'I need the perfect executive. I need the investment.'

**Thom:** If that's what you need, then great. But don't let somebody tell you that's what you need. Instinctively and personally, what do you want and what do you need? Because my story is my story and it probably won't work for you, so don't take my advice. In 2009 I was told to declare bankruptcy and start over and I didn't because I could never do that. I could never start over. Those first seven years are something I couldn't do again.

**Will:** One thing that I think has been

**'Seeing a basketball player like Russell Westbrook in a skirt seems so normal to me, but for so many it's still confusing, and they don't understand it.'**

an incredibly powerful driving force of your growth and evolution is that you guys have done a fantastic job of using interesting, talented, famous, influential people. You're sort of playing at all tiers. I now know that if I'm going to a big event, there's going to be a team of people in Thom Browne showing me all the different ways that it can be done. And I think it would be easy for a very successful, very elevated fashion designer like yourself to be, like, 'That's playing the influencer game, which is lowest-common-denominator shit, and I'm not going to do it.' But you took a different tack. I'm wondering how that conversation evolved both in your head and then here in the office.

**Thom:** Well, a lot of them started as customers. They're always real relationships, and there's some sort of real connection, of mutual appreciation for what each other does. So it's never a forced relationship, because that just doesn't work. We had one situation like that, and it just wasn't worth it.

> **'An almost classic idea proportioned in a kind of odd way is great to see on a superhuman body – and athletes just have really good bodies.'**

**Will:** I'm not trying to get you to say anything you don't want to say, but can you tell me a little bit about that?

**Thom:** Just a lack of appreciation for my staff. And I was just like, no way, forget it. How dare you. Never again.

**Will:** So somebody notable was going to wear you, and the way that they behaved just wasn't in line with what you stand for?

**Thom:** Yes. It comes down to respect. And for the most part, we have really, really nice times with everyone. It was just that one moment. Not worth it.

**Will:** Now you guys are just in this incredible groove, right? The thing that I love so much is you can get the breadth and depth of Thom Browne in just one night from all the different ways something is being worn. Was there one organic relationship that led to another? How did you get to this point?

**Thom:** I think it just evolved from the world we live in. I like people to see what I do on different types of people, in different ways, so it just naturally came about. Of course, we have more resources now, so we can do a lot more. I guess the first moment would be down on Little West 12th Street with David Bowie; how he just kind of appeared, and then how that influenced people.

**Will:** When did David Bowie appear in the shop? What was he looking for?

**Thom:** It was 2005. He just wanted to see what I was wearing; I honestly don't know how he knew about it. But I got the phone call, 'David Bowie's coming.' And I was like, 'What???' I turned a lot of people away from my shop at the beginning; they wanted things that fit them a little differently, and I was, like, 'I'm sorry, this is what it is.' He came in and he was, like, 'I want it exactly like that.' So you kind of think, 'Okay, there's something I'm doing right here.'

**Will:** Do you remember one of the first athletes where a relationship like this evolved?

**Thom:** Well, Dwyane Wade was one of the first. LeBron was a customer for a long time before the moment with the team. He and Dwyane Wade came pretty much at the same time; they were playing together. Venus Williams has been a long-time customer. Reilly Opelka.[8]

**Will:** So a Reilly Opelka or a Serge Ibaka comes in to get dressed. What is exciting to you about it? What is the challenge?

**Thom:** It's never really a challenge. A lot of times it's last-minute, so that can be a challenge, making sure that we have something that can fit. What's exciting is that I'm still a designer: when I see people wearing Thom Browne on the street, I still get excited. And athletes, especially at that level, are so inspiring because I know what it takes to be at that level. I didn't reach that level, and I know what it took just to get to where I was. They're superstars. When you talk about someone like Michael Phelps, people don't know how superhuman he is, but he is superhuman. Same thing with Serena. For her to have that career for that long…

**Will:** Yeah, it's like the great pyramids. The awe comes from seeing something that exceeds our ability to understand. What is interesting about athlete bodies versus civilian bodies? I think for some designers, it's less about the body, it's more about the garment. But I feel that with what you do with proportion, it's sort of all about the body.

**Thom:** Actually, I think sometimes it is about the garment and the proportion for me, and an almost classic idea proportioned in an odd way is great to see on a superhuman body. I think my approach to design fundamentally starts with playing with proportion, and athletes just have really good bodies.

**Will:** Like, here it is on Reilly Opelka, at seven feet tall.

**Thom:** This is why I don't understand why people don't see it and think, 'Oh, wow – I can relate to this.' Because they know how big he is. I don't know if it's just me, but I think he looks really good. What guy wouldn't want to look like that? And the same thing with women. What woman wouldn't want to look like Serena Williams?

**Will:** I understand your lack of understanding. Let's say that for the same night, you were putting Lil Uzi and Serge Ibaka in essentially the same look. How do the proportions relate to each other? Is it how a scale model works, where you're like, well, it's one to 218. Does it work like that?

**Thom:** Yeah. It kind of works that way; it really comes down to the fitting. It has to hit certain places. A classic jacket shouldn't go much past the bottom of your rear end; it should actually, hopefully be significantly shorter. They're very eye-level kinds of measurements.

**Will:** So, in a way, it does sort of work to scale. I have one arm that's longer than the other, so I need help there. But otherwise, no.

> **'Putting all of FC Barcelona in that grey suit was like seeing them all as one unit. But you also see that each one of them is such a superhuman individual.'**

**Thom:** It could fit everyone.

**Will:** We've talked about LeBron and Serge Ibaka, but what about Russell Westbrook?

**Thom:** Well, I just think he looked amazing when he wore the white pleated skirt at my Spring 2022 show. Russell brings a real confidence to everything he wears, and that confidence makes him look even better. It takes a true individual to have the confidence to wear whatever, and people like Russell and Lebron and Serge and Serena are true individuals.

**Will:** Do these athletes directly influence your design approach, and what you want to say with your clothes?

**Thom:** I just approach everything the same way, hoping to create stories that create conversations; that push the idea of what we think something is supposed to be. Seeing a basketball player in a skirt seems so normal to me, but for so many it's still confusing, and they don't understand it. So I hope the most important thing that I do is challenge people to understand differently. I just want people to see the person in the clothing, that what they're wearing is almost an extension of their own true individuality and personality.

**Will:** We touched on the tennis collection, but today, what is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about conceptualizing the Olympics collection?

**Thom:** What Olympics collection?

**Will:** The Coliseum show.[9]

**Thom:** Oh, that one. Yeah. I was, like – wait, am I designing the uniforms for the Olympics? Next summer? It's a little late! [Laughs] Well, the challenge with that collection was Covid and the logistics of just getting a collection done. I remember wanting it to be all white because of the moment we were living in. I wanted it to be the purity of just one colour. I don't remember when it became the Olympics collection, other than that we had to film it, and I thought about filming at the [Los Angeles Memorial] Coliseum. The [1932] Olympics was at the Coliseum, and I'm always inspired by that era of Olympic uniforms and purity, and the almost non-functional aspects of uniforms back in those days. Those looks were a good play with proportion. I think one of the long cardigans or the long trompe l'œil polo shirts was based on a classic polo shirt and the long skirt. I was playing with the idea of creating an Olympics in the future, based in an old Olympic stadium.

**Will:** I want to ask, how did you come to the two big team moments in 2018? You've said LeBron was a long-time client, so was he essentially gifting matching Thom Browne suits to his teammates on the Cleveland Cavaliers? How did that unfold? And just practically speaking, how do you go about fitting a whole team?

**Thom:** Well, initially it started with a conversation with Dwyane Wade. He was giving me an award at Fashion Group International, and in easy conversation I asked if the Cleveland Cavaliers would ever want to be wearing just grey suits as a team. They have access to everything and can wear whatever they want, to show their individuality. But I thought it would be even more important for young kids to see them all wearing the same thing and still being individuals, to see the power of the team. And then it was really a conversation with Dwyane and LeBron because they were on the same team at that time. They thought it was a great idea, so it was pretty easy.

**Will:** I thought it was such a powerful moment. So visual.

**Thom:** It was true to what I wanted. It became a little bit more fashion because the guys are great looking and the clothing fits so well, but for me, you saw each one of them as true individuals when they wore the same thing. I thought that was so powerful. And it was the same thing that I wanted to do with FC Barcelona: putting them all in that grey suit and seeing them all as one unit. But you also see that each one of them is such a true, superhuman individual.

**Will:** So the uniform, instead of suppressing the individuality, just becomes like a control group, which – in a counter-intuitive way, perhaps – emphasizes their individuality.

**Thom:** Then through the season, you saw some of them trying the shorts, and some of them having a better bag. LeBron at one point had the great crocodile bag. So they all kind of personalized it, but it still stayed true to the idea of a uniform. That's what I've tried to do from the beginning, to have many different versions, but for it to still feel like one focused idea. So that when you think of what I've done, even when I'm gone, there's an image that you have in your head.

**Will:** One thing that's fascinating to me about how far you've taken Thom Browne is how creativity comes from limitations. By having rules and sticking to them, you've put yourself in what some would see as a very tight box and you've made it explode.

**Thom:** It might just be the world we live in. You have to be more conscious of what you're putting out into the world. You don't want to offend, and you want to make sure that you're relevant with what's going on in the world. That does make things harder, but it can actually make you more creative. You really have to think.

**Will:** You can't just irresponsibly shoot it out of your fingertips.

**Thom:** Those days are gone.

**Will:** One thing that we really pushed back on over the years at *GQ*, was that we used to reach out to brands to dress an athlete that we were shooting – it might be an American football player who was really bulky, or an American basketball player who was really tall – and people were like, 'We're not going to fall over ourselves in the way that we normally would for a *GQ* shoot to dress a tall, black American athlete.' I think there was often a racial component to it. And it has been really cool over the last 10 years to see all of that flip the other way.

**Thom:** But shame on people that it took so long. That it wasn't immediate, like, 'Oh, great! Of course I will!'

**Will:** Yeah. The resistance of 10 years ago was palpable: I wasn't dreaming; I wasn't misperceiving. And now the eagerness is palpable. That's been quite a change, and a credit to so many athletes who were just, like, 'We love fashion and we don't give a shit about the attitude.' It's great to see now how these moments are sort of undeniable. People come to us all the time asking 'What can we do around the NBA? What can we do around global football? What can we do around F1?' Now everybody has leaned in, even if they were a little slow on the uptake.

**Thom:** Yeah, I would be slow now about offering those people the option. Like, 'Hey, remember when…?'

**Will:** [Laughs] They always remember! A last question: How is your tennis game?

**Thom:** I never play. The thing is, especially with a game like tennis, when you are fairly good at it, and then you don't really play, and then you try to play and you stink, it's not fun. Why do people bother to play sports that they aren't that good at? I just don't understand why they would do it.

**Will:** Totally. Yeah. Especially if it all kind of comes apart with time. I was playing basketball with my nephews last year, and I basically just fainted or something. I just fell down and they were like, 'Uncle Will, what happened?' And I was, like, 'I actually don't know.' What I do know is that my basketball career is fully over [both laugh]. Well, that was so fun. Thank you.

**Thom:** Thank you.

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1. In April 2018, the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team arrived in Indianapolis for their NBA playoff series with the Indiana Pacers. The Cavaliers appeared at the arena all wearing coordinated ensembles of Thom Browne's iconic grey suits – a cultural moment orchestrated by Browne, Dwyane Wade and LeBron James.

2. Suzanne Rachel Flore Lenglen was a French tennis player who became the world's first female No. 1 from 1921 to 1926, winning eight Grand Slam titles. In 1919 she won her first Wimbledon title, which today remains the second-longest final in history.

3. Since 2014, Thom Browne has hosted a Thanksgiving football game in November. Initially held at Central Park with his team, today the game's players have included models, fashion editors, photographers, dancers, actors. Teams are divided up by wearing either gray or navy Browne suits, providing an excellent brand photo op.

4. Known for his facial body modifications, in 2021, the rapper Lil Uzi Vert had a 10-carat pink diamond embedded into his forehead. It was ripped out by a fan during a concert later that year.

5. In January 2013, Thom Browne dressed First Lady Michelle Obama for the presidential inauguration. Today, the navy-silk, checkered-pattered coat and dress can be found at the National Archives.

6. Basketball player Serge Ibaka has been photographed wearing Thom Browne below-the-knee skirts since 2019.

7. Since 1 January 2023, Thom Browne has served as the CFDA's Chairman, succeeding Tom Ford. Over the years, other Chairs have included Diane von Furstenberg, Stan Herman, Bill Blass, and Oscar de la Renta.

8. At 2.11m tall, the American tennis player Reilly Opelka is tied with Ivo Karlović for the tallest-ever ATP player. Googling 'Opelka Thom Browne' gives an excellent sense of scale and proportion.

9. In October 2020, at the height of Covid, Thom Browne made a short film for his SS21 collection, titled '2132 Lunar Games'. Shot at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, the collection was based on the early 1920s Olympics, and the video projected itself into the future, with the Coliseum playing the part of a replica of itself on the moon.

# ‘Most of the time you just see athletes in their sports clothes.’

## Basketball giant Russell Westbrook brings a Thom Browne twist to NBA style.

Photographs by Philip-Daniel Ducasse
Styling by Bruno DiCorcia

All clothing and accessories by Thom Browne.
Jewellery Russell Westbrook's own.

Photography assistants: Nikolai Hagen, Darrell Tawney, Juan Rocha. Styling assistant: Zach Trubenbach.
Executive Producer: Paige Phillips @ Webber Represents. Production Manager: Hannah Schoendorf. Special thanks: Tyler Street Church.

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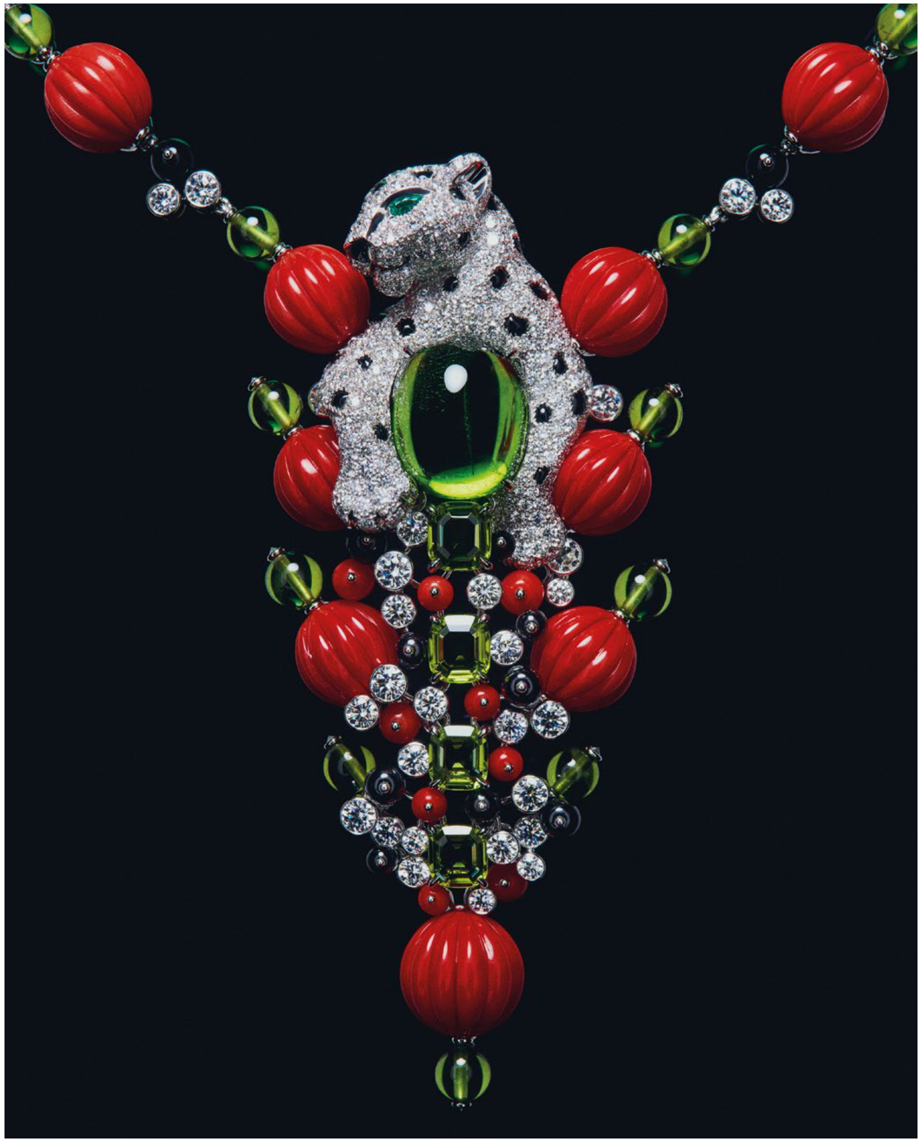
# ‘I love this one!’

Cartier’s *Le Voyage Recommencé* high jewellery collection, as selected by the pick of the industry’s red-carpet stylists.

Photographs by Charles Negre



**Mackenzie Grandquist**

***Panthère Confiante* necklace**

**Platinum, peridots, coral, onyx, emerald, diamonds.**

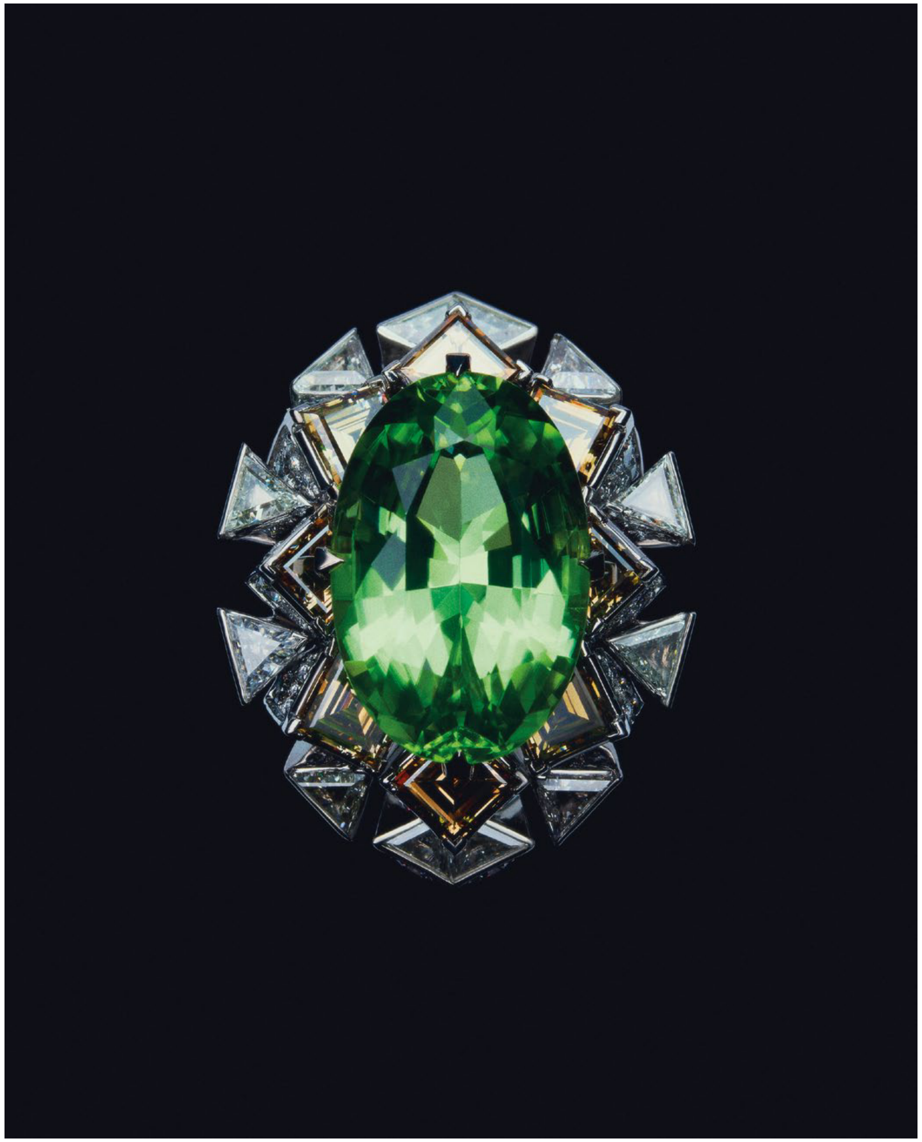
‘I love this! The large peridot is like a big bright eye staring into my soul and giving me life.’

**Dara**

***Croisillon* necklace**

**White gold, diamonds, onyx.**

'Graphic. Glamorous. Gag.'

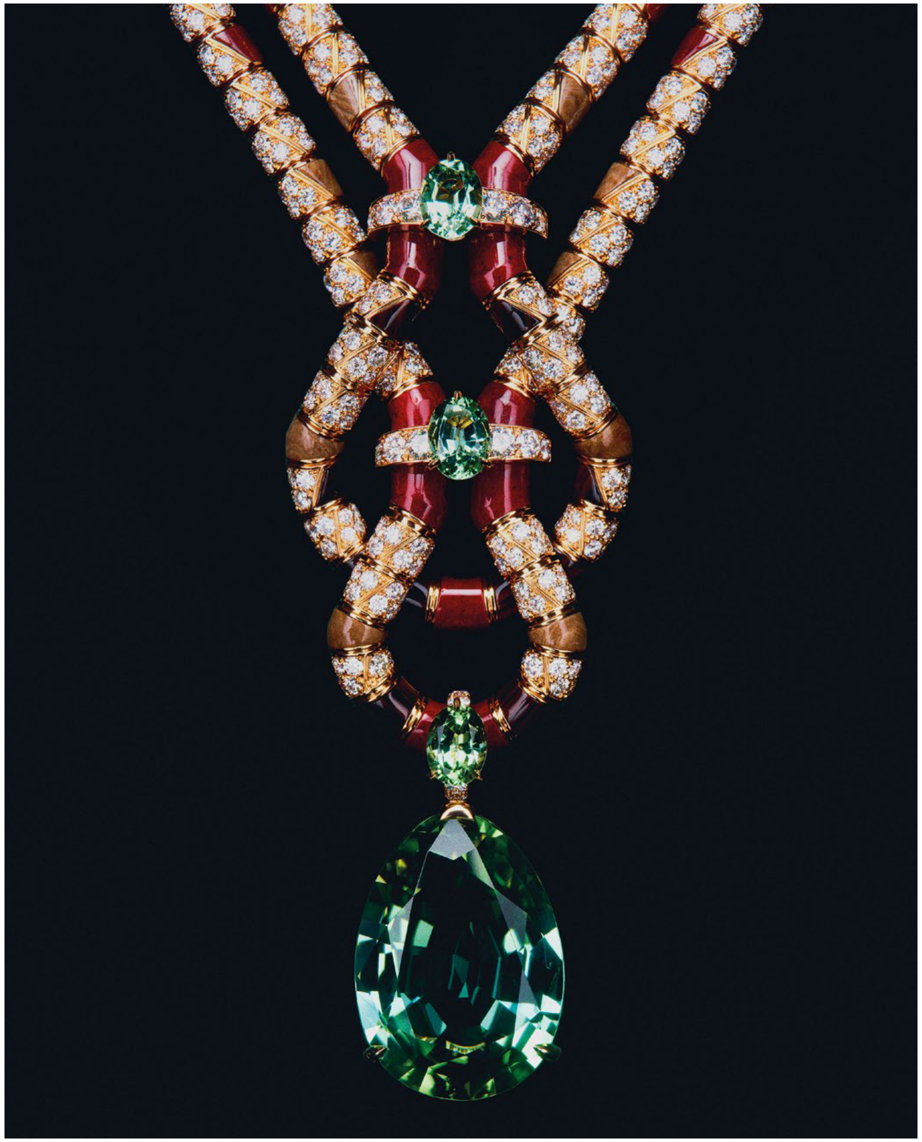


**Rebecca Corbin-Murray**

***Echino* ring**

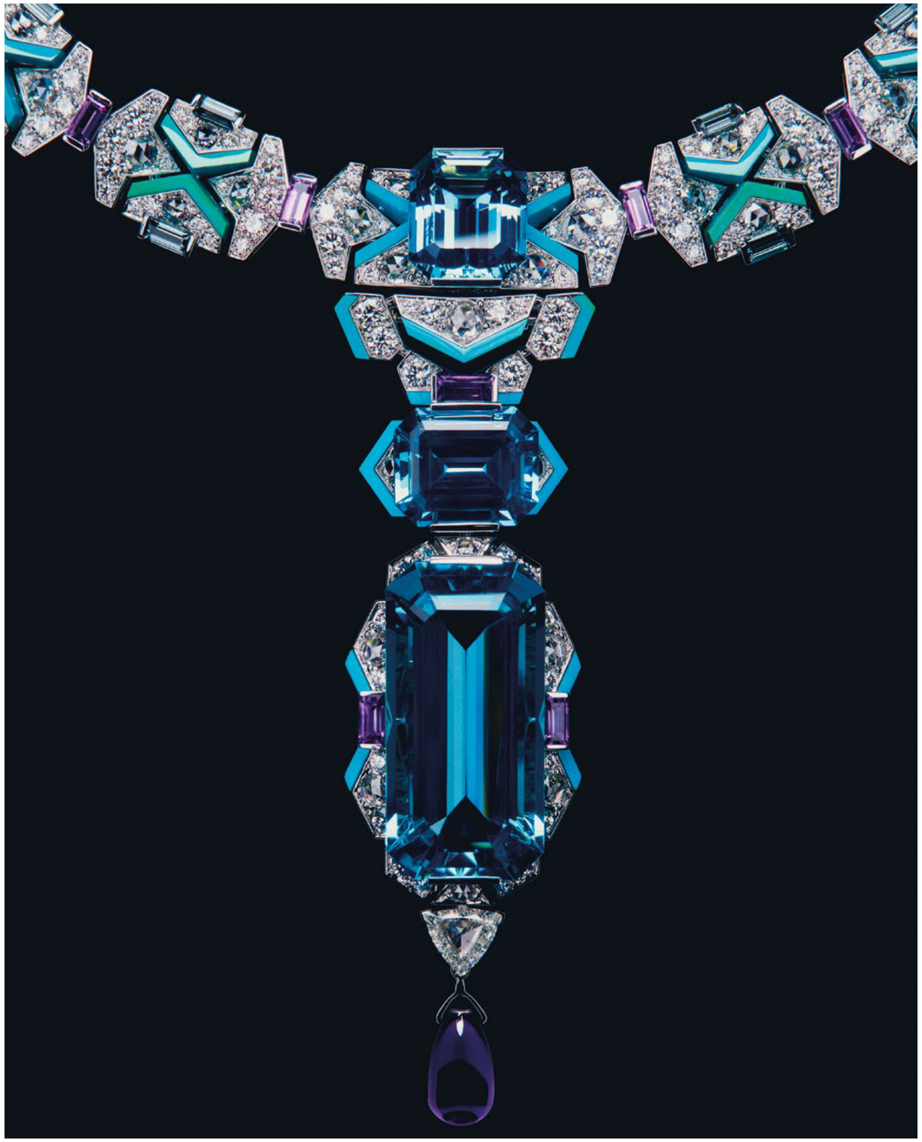
**White gold, peridot, brown diamonds, diamonds.**

'During the 1920s, women would wear a large opulent ring on the hand they held their cocktail in, to flaunt their disregard for prohibition laws. I love the idea of jewellery worn as an act of rebellion.'



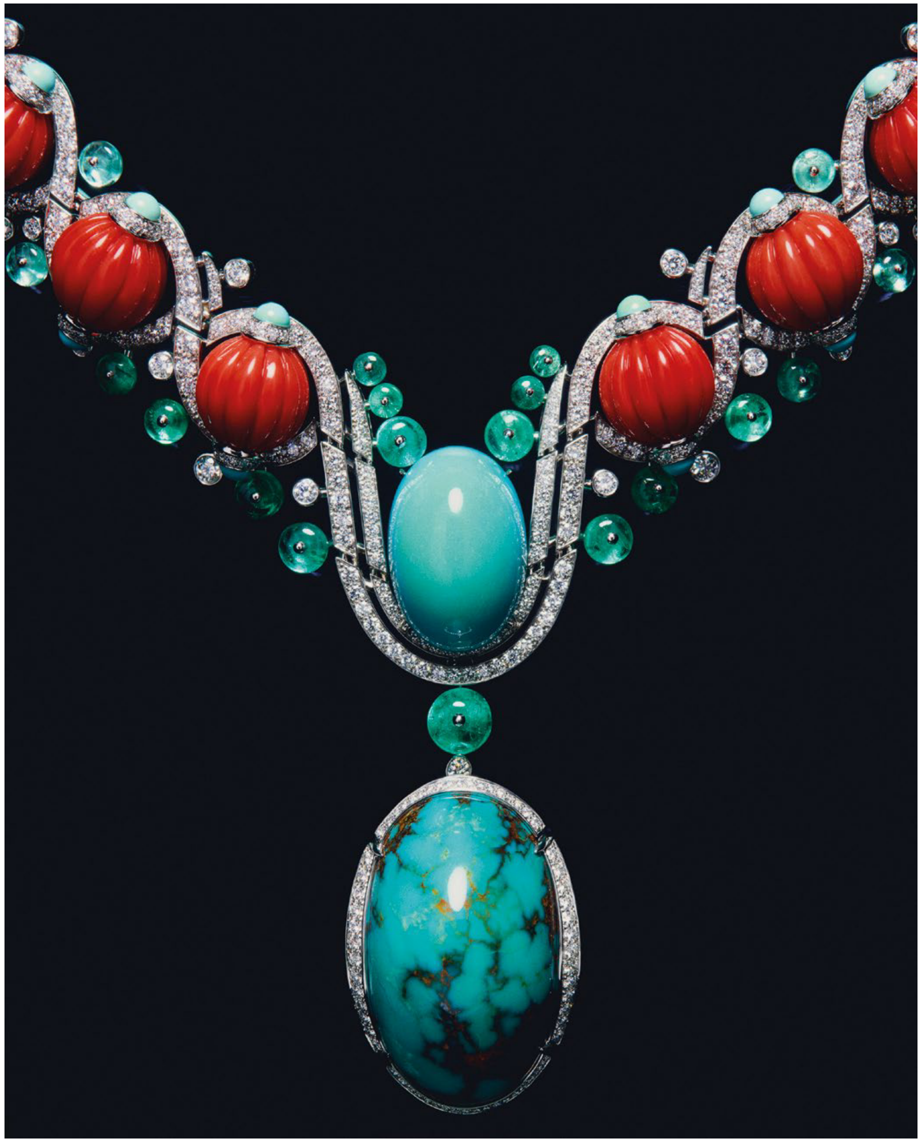
### Victoria Sekrier

***Intrico* necklace**
**Rose gold, bluish green tourmalines, obsidian, jasper, petrified wood, diamonds.**
'I love the arrangement of stones in a double loop adorned with a juicy emerald.
It feels both art deco and nautical.'



### Elizabeth Stewart

***Muqarna* necklace**
**White gold, aquamarines, amethysts, spinels, turquoises, diamonds.**
'It's a strong, elegant design but the colour combination
of the stones is fresh, bright, young, and, dare I say, fun.'

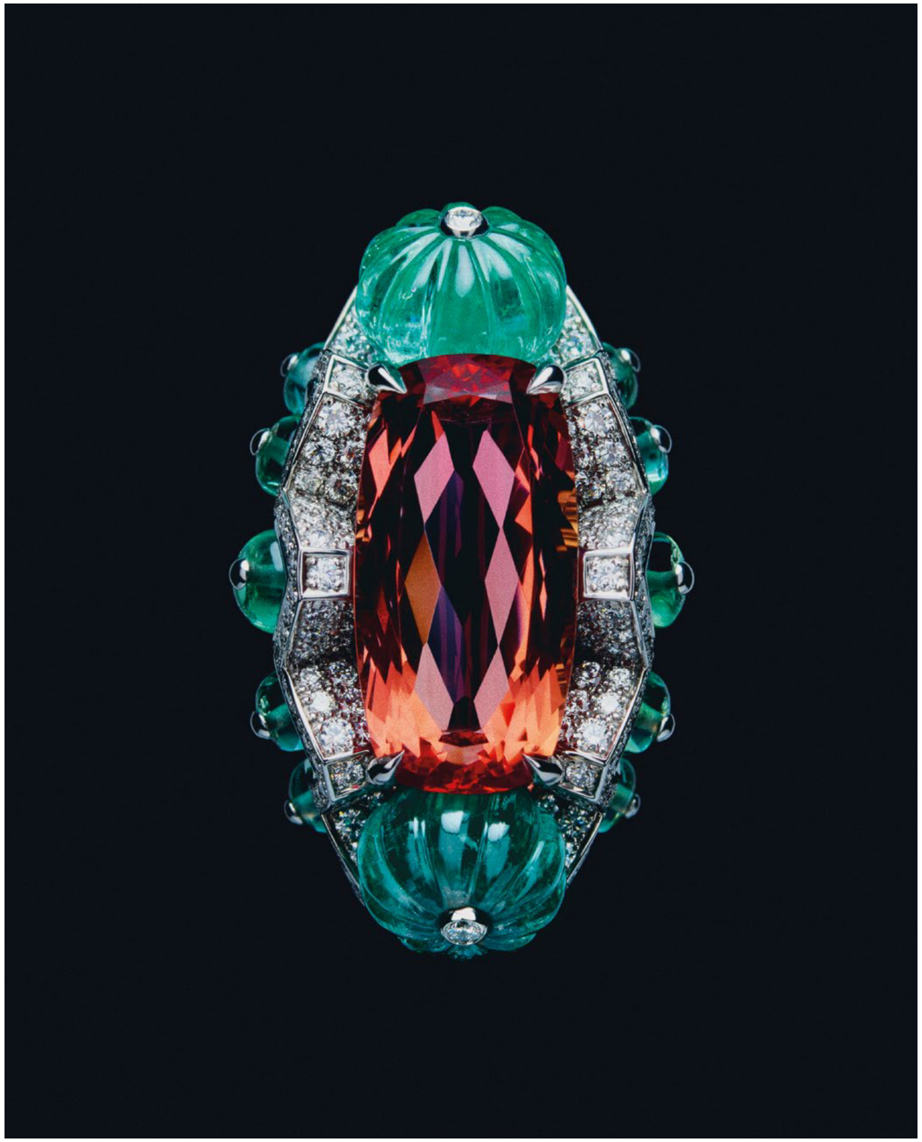


**Jahleel Weaver**

***Yfalos* necklace**

**Platinum, turquoises, coral, emeralds, diamonds.**

'The design and placement of the stones are truly unique.
The colour combinations on this piece are reminiscent of the beauty of marine life.'

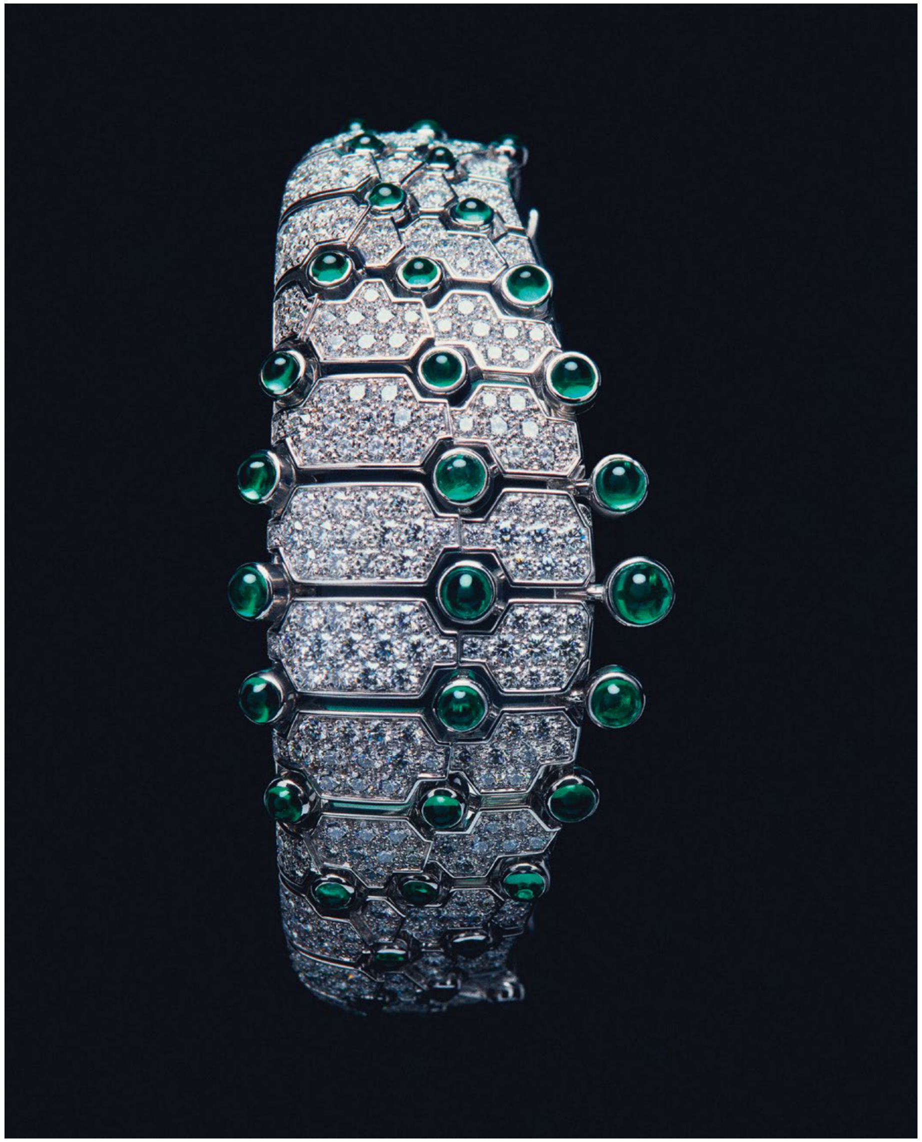


**Harry Lambert**

***Alsahma* ring**

**White gold, topaz, tourmaline, diamonds.**

'This beauty is something I would dream to find in my grandma's
jewellery collection – a sense of nostalgia but also modern.'

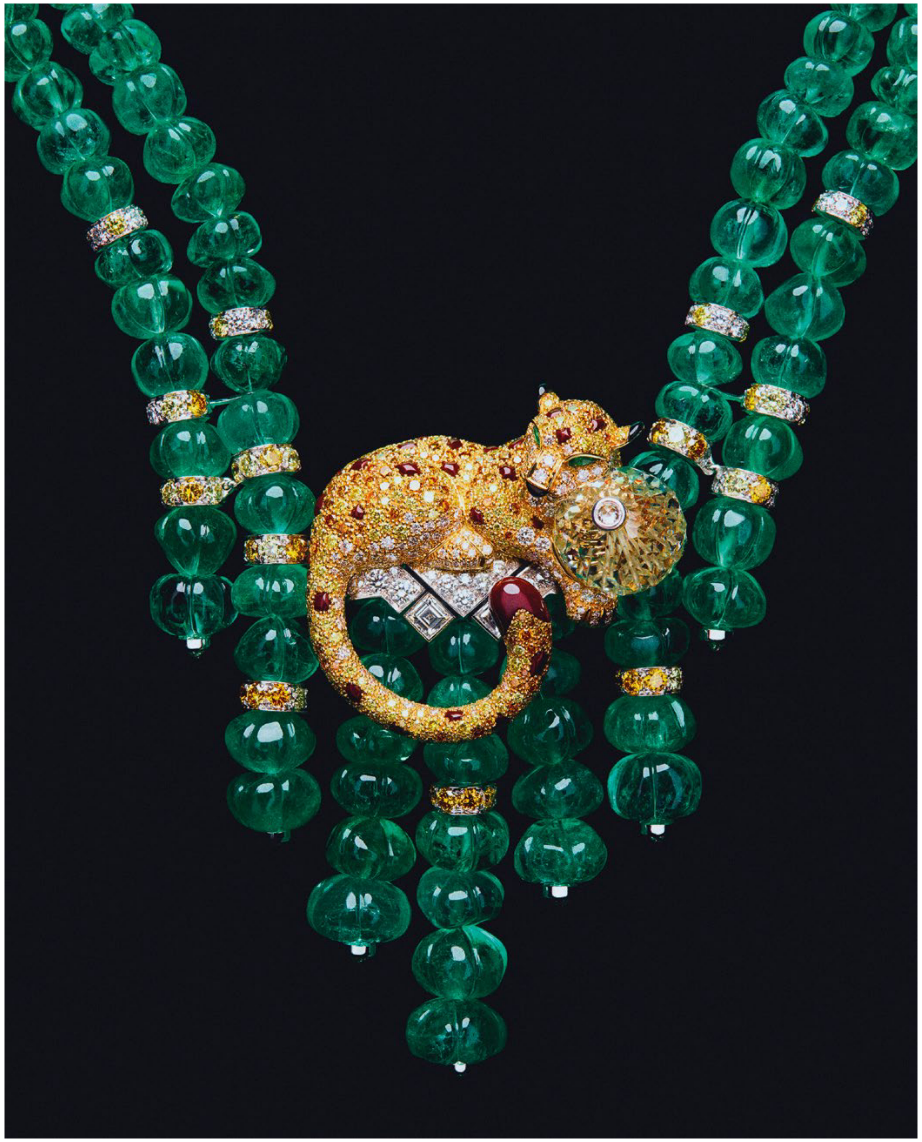


**Alexandra Rose Grandquist**

***Unda* bracelet**

**White gold, emeralds, diamonds.**

'The perfect mix of classic with a bit of edge.
The emeralds are like eyes peaking through the white diamonds.'



**Karla Welch**

***Panthère Onirique* necklace**

**White gold, yellow gold, diamonds, emeralds, red jasper, onyx, orange diamonds, yellow diamonds.**

'Au revoir, quiet luxury.'

# ‘PR is no longer just ‘Let’s get you tons of press.’’

Want to speak to Rihanna, Pharrell or Lady Gaga? You’ll need to speak to The Lede Company first.

From left to right: Amanda Silverman, Christine Su, Meredith O’Sullivan and Sarah Levinson Rothman at the Lede Company’s New York office.

**Interview by Jonathan Wingfield**
**Photograph by Peter Ash Lee**

What do you say to Will Smith after he slaps Chris Rock? You're his publicist, he's about to win an Oscar – a life goal – and you have to help him navigate the moment, with 16 million people watching and social media blowing up in real time. The Lede Company is named after a traditional print journalism term – a 'lede' is an arresting opening to a story – but the world this PR powerhouse inhabits could not be further from the slow cycles of old media, when 'press' meant writing a press release, and stories were spun on TV news. Online, it takes minutes for a reputation to shatter, whether that of an individual or a multinational corporation, and PR arguably plays *the* central role in the new space between the personal and professional, between politics and privacy, creativity and commerce.

**'You used to get faxes from newspapers saying, 'You have three days to comment on this thing for your client.' Today, you've got two seconds to react.'**

Meredith O'Sullivan was the publicist with Will Smith that night in March 2022, fielding the most high-profile celebrity PR crisis of our times; four years earlier, she was one of three women meeting in a Santa Monica hotel room, each unsure about the future, having just simultaneously quit senior positions at major PR firm 42West. Contractually barred from reaching out to former clients, O'Sullivan, Amanda Silverman and Sarah Levinson Rothman could only sit and wait for calls to come in. The gamble paid off, and the calls came, bringing an avalanche of A-list celebrities and blue-chip companies to the roster of an agency that didn't yet have a name: Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Charlize Theron, Halle Berry, Pharrell Williams, Emma Stone, Amy Schumer, Penélope Cruz, Ariana Grande, Jennifer Garner, the Obamas' media production company Higher Ground. Soon they were joined by a fourth founder, Christine Su, former vice president for global communications at Converse, and they set about establishing a new approach to PR. Rather than be another celebrity PR firm, Lede focuses on the interplay between creative worlds, in that new space where a celebrity might take a political stand, collaborate with a brand, perform on-stage, present a new film, and design a fashion collection – all in the same week.

That lateral approach is reflected in its company structure. Lede has four equal co-CEOs, each with 20 years of experience in complementary backgrounds: Silverman in New York with a more music-led roster of talent, O'Sullivan in LA with the pick of Hollywood's finest, Levinson Rothman in corporate communications, and Su working directly with brands, many of them in the fashion space. Now with more than 150 employees across offices in LA, New York, London and Paris, Lede boasts 400 active clients ('more than 200 brand and corporate clients and more than 175 talent') spread over nine core categories. They represent celebrities reaching into fashion and beauty: Pharrell with Humanrace, Adidas, and Billionaire Boys Club; Ariana Grande and her beauty line R.E.M.; Rihanna with Savage lingerie and Fenty Beauty. And they represent fashion brands seeking celebrities, hype, cultural significance, and then more celebrities, ensuring that Isabel Marant, Thom Browne, Kenzo, Altuzarra and others have the right people in the front row.

Back in October, *System* was granted a rare audience with the four founders in Lede's New York boardroom for a deep-thoughts chat – no interruptions, only occasional distracted checking of iPhones – to discuss cultural cross-pollination, crisis management, how 'authenticity' has replaced endorsement, and why PR today is so much more than 'knowing which model is going to convert for a Tiffany ad.'

**Let's start by talking about the communications landscape today.**

**Sarah Levinson Rothman:** So much of the way that a person or brand is seen by the world today is dictated by comms and PR. Twenty years ago, PR was siloed, but now it's evolved to be one of the most important functions in the strategic outlook of a person or an organization.

**What do you think have been the pivotal moments in that evolution?**

**Meredith O'Sullivan:** Social media is the obvious one, right? We all were there for that shift when we were young assistants, just starting out. Things used to move so slowly. We'd get a fax from a newspaper saying, 'You have three days to comment on this thing for your client.' Three days! And there'd be panic [laughs]. Today you have less than two seconds to react. Which is actually a good thing. People didn't used to really care how much they knew about someone, but now I think that the consumer – whether it's generational or just things moving quicker in the digital era – wants to know more. And so this narrative or storytelling aspect has arisen, where things have to be true while still being interesting enough so that people will want to show up – whether that's going to a concert, buying a movie ticket or buying a piece of clothing. For me, that's only accelerated. And to Sarah's point, I think when marketing teams were in silos they did one thing – they knew which model was going to convert for a Tiffany ad. But they didn't speak to the story behind making that ad, like, how did you pick that photographer? That change might have been gradual, but it feels fast. We saw it happening with our staff. As younger and younger generations have come in, the conversations change. So you need to change with them on behalf of your clients.

**'Brands know that the more they drive cultural conversations, the more they'll drive revenue. Just putting a press release out is no longer gonna cut it!'**

**Christine, coming at this from a brand perspective, did you see it coming?**

**Christine Su:** For sure. I spent close to five years at Converse in a comms role, and because so much of what brands do is driven by what's happening in the cultural landscape, chief comms officers are often becoming CMOs now. Typically, all the tactical, above-the-line marketing stuff used to have the more significant budget allocation, but you're now seeing brands put more dollars behind a comms rollout, and you're seeing a lot more of that integration across the board from a brand perspective. Many of the brands that we work with want to be able to drive cultural conversations. Just putting a press release out there is so old school, you know. That's no longer gonna cut it!

**When you say brands are allocating more of their budget on a comms rollout, what do you sense is the return on that from the brand's perspective? Does cultural impact suffice? Do they now consider marketing and comms as the way to convert into pure revenue?**

**Christine:** Absolutely. They're seeing that the more they can embed themselves from a cultural standpoint, the more they can drive revenue and drive sales. I have a great example. Rihanna wore one of my clients – MM6 Margiela – at the Super Bowl, and there were all these stories about how her red outfit, that $1,500 look, had sold out. They couldn't keep it in stock. Traditionally, people didn't see that kind of thing as necessarily driving sales. And now it's like, okay, this is an important part of the strategy. Talent's VIP seating is always so integrated, too. Because in today's marketplace, brand marketing and communications has become interwoven as part of a brand's go-to-market strategy. That includes everything from talent or celebrity engagement to experiential to social media. There are more and more agencies specialized in these specific areas of expertise and brands understand that it all has to be fully integrated to be successful today.

**Amanda Silverman:** PR was always part of the conversation. But I don't think it was always part of the strategy. It sort of just happened before and now it's more intentional.

**Sarah:** Look at the strategy that's behind some of the biggest movies this year – *Barbie*, *The Super Mario Bros Movie*, *Oppenheimer*, and Taylor Swift [*The Eras Tour*]. Those four seeped into popular culture and really broke out; people wanted to go see those movies because they wanted to be able to talk about them with everyone else.

**Amanda:** There's a very thoughtful strategy behind that. I mean, Sarah from the corporate side often brings Christine in from the culture side to say, 'Hey, we need to infuse culture into what we're doing.' Of course, we don't make movies ourselves at Lede, but we have clients who do incredible things that connect to culture. And I think sometimes they lean towards us to embed that connection in their strategy.

**Give me an example.**

**Sarah:** So, for *The Super Mario Bros Movie*, we brought Christine's team in.

**Christine:** And Red Wing Shoes recreated the boot that Mario wears in the movie.[1]

**Sarah:** But they only made one single boot. Christine came up with the idea, but they did a whole activation around the imprint of the sole of the boot.

**Christine:** It was a girl on my team who had the idea of the imprint. We hired a company to make the imprint and we teased it out and created an event at the Nintendo store where so many people showed up to get the imprint of this boot. It got so much coverage.

**Sarah:** On the flip side though, an example that we weren't involved with was 'Barbenheimer', which I don't think was, you know, entirely strategic...

**Did anyone see that coming?**

**Meredith:** I don't think to that degree.

**Sarah:** What happened was incredible. Everyone dressed in pink, going to see an *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie* double header. It was drawing millions of people who don't normally go to these movies; they wanted to be a part of culture.

**What do you think it is about celebrities that makes them global avatars for such intense desire and aspiration?**
**Amanda:** You're often looking at them as people who are affecting culture and creating a sort of narrative that feels really desirable. And when you get that feeling, it's because of the authenticity of the artist or celebrity to the brand.

**Give me an example of that. Because when I hear the word 'authenticity', it often makes me think the opposite.**
**Amanda:** I can think of a few examples. One would be Riri [Rihanna] and Fenty Beauty. She always did her own makeup on tour in the beginning, and I think she saw a real gap in the market regarding shades of foundation. She is the first person to launch a beauty brand with shades of foundation; you know, you usually launch with lipstick or mascara. I remember sitting in the first meeting with her partners at Kendo [LVMH-owned beauty brand developer and wholesaler]. But I think the fact that she is who she is – as inspirational, as incredible, as talented, superficially as beautiful – and you see her every night on tour with glowing skin and her saying, 'I can't find anything to match my skin colour.' And then launching Fenty Beauty. That's authentic. When you have to mix eight foundations to come up with your skin colour and you're Rihanna – I mean, think about everyone else! Same thing with Pharrell and Louis Vuitton, when Marc Jacobs gave him a shot in the luxury fashion world. When, at first, everybody turned their nose up at rappers, black musicians, entering the fashion world, Marc Jacobs said, 'I like what you're doing, I see you know what the kids are doing. You're part of that world; I want to collaborate with you.' And that was his first introduction into luxury fashion as a creative. Authenticity might seem like bullshit, but that's the truth. And now that he's creating there, he brings his own spin to it, and it feels inspirational. I mean, those primary-coloured Speedys [bags] could not be more him and more Louis Vuitton!

**Talking of Fenty Beauty, I took my teenage daughter and her friend to Sephora yesterday. And it's celebrity beauty line after celebrity beauty line after celebrity beauty line. They're interchangeable. So how do you help your clients express their uniqueness in a marketplace which feels so oversaturated?**
**Christine:** Navigating the challenge of oversaturation is tricky, especially when *every* talent seems to have a brand, especially in the beauty category. When we take on these projects, we aim to go beyond the surface and understand the white space and nuances, getting to the core of their vision. It's about more than just launching a product; it's crafting a narrative that resonates with media and influencers, and in turn the consumer. For instance, when we launched Humanrace skincare, we recognised that while Pharrell's skincare routine is a commonly asked question, we acknowledged that consumers understand he's not necessarily a skincare expert. So, we needed to bring someone in to give the line credential; we leveraged Pharrell's dermatologist as the expert. This ensured a unique voice and story that set it apart in the crowded market. In essence, it's about defining what we're trying to say when we introduce something to the marketplace. What's the story that captures attention and leaves a lasting impact?
**Meredith:** For talent, you have to know who they are and who their core audience is. Who do they appeal to? What kind of things does that audience care about? Then you can expand the aperture and broaden that customer base, so you know which stories you're telling, and to whom. On the talent side, we often find that brands just want someone because they have a lot of followers. I'm, like – let's say it's an alcohol brand – do you even know if they drink alcohol? And then we saw a shift where the talent – the individuals – were, like, 'I'm going to have to invest in this; I'm going to have to co-own a brand, or I'm going to have to be a creative director.' Ten years ago, someone could just slap their name on something and it would work. Endorsements were rampant; everybody loved them. Then there was this shift into taking a co-founder position.

**When I watch fashion shows online, my residual memory is often of the front row more than the collection. We're in an era now where the collection itself is not the be-all. The brand is the core. The celebrity association is essential. These things make up the full package.**
**Sarah:** It's not any one thing. And 90% of the work we do with fashion clients, on the show front, yes – it's curating that front row. Who's going to show up? What do they look like? When Isabel Marant came to us, she was trending down a little because the white sneaker

> **'Celebrities are valuable when you're operating a fashion company that's making billions; they're no longer just siloed in this little Hollywood bubble.'**

had died down. We've been working with her for a couple of years now, and a lot of the work is making sure she is still ingrained in culture. We started a TikTok account for her. And, you know, she was like, 'Why are you inviting social influencers to my show?' And we said, 'Well, because all of the fashion people are following them.' And at the next show, she's like, 'Where are they? They need to come back!' So, it's an important part of a strategy – especially for the more iconic brands that may be a little more hesitant to change – to see what they are going to get out of this.

**Do you find yourself going to a brand and saying, 'Sure, you might want this big celebrity associated with your brand – every brand does – but they're not actually the best fit for you'? When does the PR push become more a question of restraint?**
**Amanda:** I think that's always how we look at things. I don't think any of us think 'more is more'. Everyone we represent works far too hard for what happens to simply be haphazard; it has to feel like it makes sense. And I think consumers and fans see through things that don't make sense. People are very aware now. And it has to make sense from the brand perspective, from the client perspective. Smarter is better.

**Could you give me an example of when something didn't work, for that exact reason? It's so easy in retrospect to say of course that wasn't going to work. But sometimes, even with the most experienced experts, things just don't stick.**
**Christine:** I think some alliances don't make sense, and people don't think it through all the way. Like when Kendall [Jenner] did that Pepsi ad.[2] Everybody tore that apart. They're like, this doesn't make any sense. It's tone-deaf. And think about all the marketing people in the room that had to be there for that ad to come to life, and it somehow made its way to market. Clearly somebody wasn't doing their job.
**Sarah:** We haven't talked about that yet – the extent to which the world has changed in terms of people and values.

**Sarah, you represent that side of Lede. Today, it is fundamental to any individual or organization to at least be aware of social responsibility. But 15, 20 years ago that didn't really exist.**
**Sarah:** *Four* years ago that didn't exist! There were two big pivotal moments. One was the Time's Up movement, and the other was George Floyd in 2020. I run the corporate communications side of Lede, which is working with media and entertainment companies. And if you look at what we're going through right now, I mean, everyone has to be so thoughtful about what they say as an organization, plus what their employees and executives are saying on a personal level, because that can really make or break an organization, or a campaign. It's so tricky. That has so much to do with social media.

**Everyone's under the microscope.**
**Sarah:** Yes, and the complexities of the issues that we're dealing with politically on a global basis… I'm not talking just now [the Israel-Hamas war] but all of the issues that we've all seen over the past five, ten years. When this current situation started unfolding, a lot of people in the news were talking about how this was the first big terrorist attack since social media existed. I'm not going to name the name, but there was a movie studio that was putting out a movie in the past few weeks, and because of a statement that they gave publicly, which was, I think, pretty down the middle, as much as they could be, some Middle Eastern countries pulled out of showing the movie. These are the kinds of things you're dealing with: a statement that a company puts on social media, that has nothing to do with an individual film, can result in that film not being released in certain countries.

**It's a tightrope for publicists between needing to generate buzz, while minimizing any negative attention.**
**Meredith:** When I started, I was advised to tell people to never get political. And now I primarily advise my clients that if they care about something, speak up. Of course, you have to find the fine line. Not everybody is an activist, but if something is personal to you, that you care about, that's affecting humanity, you're not going to just step back.
**Sarah:** If you look at brands, one of the first mainstream purpose-driven brands was TOMS Shoes.[3] But now, in a way, every brand has to have a purpose; it's part of that brand's personality. This younger generation is looking at how brands react to situations; looking at what they do and if they make this world a better place. And, honestly, they are looking to see if the brand holds true to those promises.

> **'Endorsements were rampant. Someone could just slap their name on something and it would work. Now it's shifted into taking a co-founder position.'**

**Meredith:** It goes back to tying the brand to the individual. Before that happens, it's important to know who is making the decisions at the highest level of the company they are working for. A lot of the recent corporate upheaval and heightened awareness has allowed us as consumers to take a look inside these companies and at their systems. If it's all the same type of person who has a seat at the table for all decision making, there's a reason perhaps not everything is being considered. So, when a brand seeks counsel from us, it works well when we can offer both our diversity of experiences as well as our inherent knowledge of the client's values, strengths, and passions.

**Would you say you have genuine influence with someone who's heading up a global brand? Are they receptive to your advice? Do they act on it?**
**Sarah:** That's essentially our job now. I mean, 20 years ago, our job was to do a press release and try to get a story in the *New York Times*. Our job now is to sit on the phone and on Zoom and in-person all day, every day to advise individuals, advise companies on a very holistic picture of what's going on. PR is no longer just 'Let's get you tons of press.' It's more like, 'How is this going to affect the entire life of a product or a brand or a company?'

> **'Think about all the marketing people in the room for Kendall's Pepsi ad… yet it *still* made its way to market. Clearly somebody wasn't doing their job.'**

**What would you say the metrics of success are for, say, an individual or organisation that Lede represents?**
**Sarah:** I think on the ground it's still the traditional KPIs: media impressions, impression rates, sales conversions. But I think the added bonus is: how is my brand showing up in social media, in the culture? The last three or four years, working with Thom Browne, the brand has taken off and the team has said a lot of it is due to the fact that they're seeing better engagement across the board globally with consumers. They're resonating more. They're getting more youthful, more diverse. I think our team has played a good part in that.

**Let's do a quick roleplay. Imagine I'm a great artist or talent, someone who's credible, has a unique point of view, and has a global reach. What's your elevator pitch to me to come and join your roster at Lede?**
**Amanda:** We are like a segue between who an artist is and what they want to put out in the world. It's about being a good partner. I meet with potential clients first, because they have to feel like I'm the right person to help them achieve their goals, and that's always evolving and changing as the person grows. You know, I've represented Charlize Theron since she shot the movie *Monster*, and her goals then were not the same as her goals now. *Monster* was one of the first films she produced. Now she has a very powerful production company and it's a really important part of her story as both an artist and business woman. She also has an incredible foundation called CTAOP[4] which is a big part of what she does, so we've focused on both of these in press to create not just awareness but hopefully opportunities as well. The question with talent is often, 'What do you feel has been missing? What do you want to do? Let's figure out ways that we can do that together. I might not be the right person for you, you know. And that's okay.' I want to work with clients who trust our instincts and our advice and our partnership just as much as the other way around.

**Are they generally able to articulate clearly what it is they want?**
**Meredith:** Sometimes it has to be driven by us saying, 'This is how I see you showing up in the world and here is what I would love to see as a part of that journey.' But yes, I'd say a lot of clients know what they want. Obviously with the newcomers who are just at the beginning of their career – perhaps about to have a meteoric moment – it's a very different conversation. It's a discussion on how this role of representative will fit into their life, and it's a vibe check. Since our job is to give thoughtful strategic advice and to execute on it, they have to understand the way the person who is representing them is moving through the world and speaking about them. So if there isn't a connection, mutual respect, and understanding of each other as people, artists, executives, or whatever they're doing, it's probably not the right fit.
**Sarah:** I don't represent individuals, but it's very hard for this to work if there isn't trust. And sorry to keep using this word, but it goes back to authenticity. There has to be authentic trust between two people. Because this is everything to them; in our social-media world, it's their reputation.
**Amanda:** And I think that's the same for individuals as it is for brands or companies. The conversations Sarah is having are the same ones Christine is having and the same ones Meredith and I are having.
**Christine:** Just a little more matrix with the brands, because you have more individuals involved in them.
**Meredith:** For the most part, in representing talent, there's no bureaucracy to get through; you go straight to them and the relationship is between the two of you. We don't generally set weekly calls with talent; we're on text message and they know that they can reach us whenever. They're creative people, and we need to know when to step back and to give them space. There's that protection of their time and humanity, making sure that we put them in the best possible scenario for them to show up and do the thing that makes them wonderful.

> **'When I started out, I was advised to tell people to never get political. Now I primarily advise my clients that if they care about something, speak up.'**

**When I think about someone like Pharrell, for example, I imagine he has a personal PR, a music PR, a record company PR… and then Louis Vuitton has one of the biggest global comms operations of any brand in the world. So how do you create a cohesive publicity strategy? How do you not step on each other's toes?**
**Amanda:** The people who win the most are those who are the most collaborative, because there's no way I know everything, there's no way Meredith knows everything, there's no way Rocky or Jay Brown – who's Riri's and Rocky's manager – know everything, or Puma knows everything. And, like, how are the Puma team to work with? Phenomenal! Jay Brown, who's one of our closest advisers, is so collaborative. I think that's the only way to do it. And even though everyone has their own personal powerhouse, to bring all of that together is the most powerful.

**What do you think Lede specifically brings to those collaborations?**
**Amanda:** Our superpower, and the reason we created this agency, is to have the four of us brainstorming together. Christine has the unique perspective of coming from a corporate brand background, and Sarah obviously worked at corporate film companies before. Previously, whenever I represented a talent but didn't have someone in-house on the brand side, I always felt a couple of steps behind, because I was trusting someone outside to sort of hold hands with me. With Christine and her team on board, we get that perspective in-house. It means she has more of an innate understanding of how talent works, and we have a better understanding of the brand perspective, which just makes it so much easier, because we have a better idea of what we can really make happen. At the end of the day, we just want our clients to look good and to have overall success. None of us are here for any power trip or any ego bullshit.
**Sarah:** I think the one thing that we all share in common is that we all want to be behind the scenes. Like, it's not about us…
**Amanda:** …as we sit here doing an interview about ourselves!
**Sarah:** [laughs] But it's not about us! We're not the talent. We're not the CEO. We're the people who help these people with their strengths, with their comms and their strategy. What we were saying about collaboration: we get on the phone all the time and someone says, 'We actually work with this other agency on this and this,' and we're like, the more the merrier! Collaborating with other people makes you stronger.
**Amanda:** I think it's also important to say that we all have kids and families who are very important to us, too.

**Why do you think it's important to say that in the context of this interview?**
**Amanda:** Because I think it gives you better perspective. It's funny, people are like, 'Oh, are you going to be able to do both? Like, be able to have kids *and* do your job?' But I think it gives us such a better perspective on what's important, what to focus on, what to prioritize. Plus, we can ask our kids about what's cool and what their friends think. I know so much about music just from my son playing basketball, honestly. So, it's been helpful for us to really be able to do both.
**Christine:** And I think it's also given us a perspective on how we want to shape our agency, because we want to create a place that looks like the world we live in today. I mean, the four of us are very different, but the last five years we've gotten along. We've had no fights. It's been really successful, what we built together. And hopefully our kids can look at this and be like, 'Mom, I'm proud of you.' This is a place that looks like the world we're living in today. That's an important part of the culture, here.

**I recently asked my wife, who did both agency and in-house fashion PR for about 20 years, what she had learnt**

**about the world of publicity in that time, and she told me, 'The squeaky wheel gets the oil.' You know, you might have multinational companies or high-profile designers on your roster, yet it's often the unknown accessories designer who's calling every day, asking where their *Vogue* cover is, who gets the disproportionately high level of service. The squeaky wheel gets the oil. Is that true in your experience?**

**Amanda:** That kind of attitude has the opposite effect on me! [laughs]

**Christine:** It's especially the smaller brands and designers; they tend to be so involved. They want to know every single thing that's happening and every single thing that you're doing until you're like, 'Do you really need to micro-manage what we're doing?' Whereas some of the bigger clients trust you that you're going to do the right thing. And they have teams that know how comms works.

# 'I think we're all looking at [Pinault's acquisition of CAA] to see what it means; if it's a success for both parties. It's certainly a sign of where we're heading.'

**Meredith:** For the four of us, I think it's pretty simple: we all work hard, we all share, we hustle, and we just get it done. To Amanda's point, when the client looks great and the brand looks great, or when, from a business perspective, there's a return for the company you're working for, it feels really good that you could effect a change. That's what drives you to work hard. And to go back to how we choose clients or they choose us, you have to have a degree of passion for what they do, or feel like they're an important symbol in this world, and that's what drives you in your work.

**What would you give as an example of that? Amanda spoke before about Fenty Beauty. But for you, can you specify a particular moment with a client that was all of those things you've mentioned: you know, hitting culture, hitting a moment, hitting a purpose.**

**Meredith:** … I was looking at Amanda because… [they both laugh] – because I'm the most secretive. I never give specifics about clients.

**I don't need to know a name!**

**Meredith:** You know, if a client has never been in the award space before and you run an amazing film or television campaign and then they are, that feels really good. Or if you're there from the ground up, and then a trailer breaks the internet, you're a part of those special moments. And also when something bad happens and you're able to help that person build back to a place of confidence, where there's no more fear and they feel that they can step out into the world again, and you were a part of helping them.

**Given that he's one of your highest-profile clients, and he's the cover star of this issue of *System*, I just want to go back to the topic of Pharrell. What were your thoughts when you first heard about Pharrell and Louis Vuitton? Did you see that as a kind of landmark moment, or the result of an evolution that's been happening over years, even decades?**

**Amanda:** It's bigger than us, I think that's the way the world is moving, and Pharrell is the perfect encapsulation of it all. Understanding collaboration and the overlapping of so many different ideas, perspectives and media is what Pharrell has always represented as a human being. I mean, people say this all the time: he is a Renaissance man. And – not to sound cheesy – there is something of a cultural renaissance going on, in terms of culture, entertainment and corporate coming together. I mean, that's how we view the world as well; that's why we created our company. So, thanks, Pharrell, for doing that!

**Christine:** I think a lot of brands have been moving in that direction. It kind of started with Virgil being appointed to Louis Vuitton. He wasn't a designer by background, but he was someone who was ingrained in culture in so many different ways. And what a lot of brands are looking for now, especially on the creative director front, are people who are not necessarily traditional designers, but are really ingrained in culture, who are driving cultural conversations that touch upon sport, fashion, music, and who can help take the brand to the next level, versus, like, being able to sketch out a collection. We represent Daniel Arsham. He's a sculpture and artist, but he was named creative director of the Cleveland Cavaliers.

**Amanda:** From the start, seeing people and brands do things that you wouldn't normally expect has always made what we do so interesting. Even back in the day, like when the movie *Kids* came out and it was Harmony Korine and Larry Clark; people stepping outside of their discipline but understanding the world at large is what makes things so interesting. And I think it's cool that so many brands and movies and fashionshows and companies are all going in that direction.

**Given *System*'s fashion-industry perspective, what impact does the Pinault family stepping out of their discipline and acquiring a majority stake in CAA have on the culture in which you work?**

**Meredith:** It's a little too soon to tell. I think we're all looking at it to see what it means. To see if it's a success for both parties. Is it a fit? But the reason you're interviewing us, is probably that the talent world that has traditionally been so siloed from fashion is now fusing into its culture. Celebrities are valuable when you're operating a company that's making billions; they're no longer siloed in this little Hollywood bubble.

**Sarah:** Again, it's a sign of where we are and where we're probably heading.

**I remember going to an Ungaro show in 2009 that Lindsay Lohan was the creative director of, and at the time it was widely regarded as a complete disaster. Perhaps with the benefit of time, that didn't necessarily feel like an authentic fit. But these days, a contemporary artist like Daniel Arsham becoming the creative director of a basketball team feels like the most natural thing in the world. So what do you think is the future of celebrity, of artists, of entertainment ingraining itself further into everything?**

**Meredith:** That's an interesting question. People make these declarative statements, like 'The movie star is dead and it's all about TikTokers.' And I think what's different is that there's room for everyone, right? The amount of content has multiplied like you can't believe. Five or six years ago, there were 150 shows nominated for the Emmys, and there's now over 500, because of streaming. How can people watch all this content? But there's more access to all of this and to all of these people. So, as long as a movie star still does a good movie and creates a beautiful moment that tugs on your heartstrings, people will want to be connected to that content. So, I feel that every time they try to write off talent or say, 'Oh we don't need the star,' I think there's still something special about a lot of these people and a lot of our clients – that creative beat or glow that a lot of other people don't have. As long as that exists, talent and celebrities will still be relevant. Of course, there are examples of how reality stars and TikTokers are taking over, but there's room for both.

**Do you play a part in that side of celebrity? In reality stars and influencers?**

**Meredith:** I don't want to shut the door on it, but it's not our core client base. Christine's group has a massive engagement with that side of the business.

**Christine:** We do a lot of work with influencers and influencer programming. To Meredith's point, there's so much room for all these different types of people and talent. Now you have fashion brands inviting athletes to shows, because sports are so ingrained in fashion. It's opened up the aperture for a lot more opportunities.

**What about the future of Lede? Where do you see it in five, ten years time?**

**Amanda:** We're taking a vacation!

**Sarah:** I think we'll continue growing both horizontally and vertically, meaning we'll hopefully continue growing what our core business is now, and then continue exploring and getting into other businesses that make sense. When we started out, they did talent, I did corporate, and we looked so long for someone to do brand. And brand is now our biggest division; it fits in so perfectly into everything that we already do.

**Christine:** We just acquired a fashion PR agency in Paris [OBCM, now retitled Lede Paris], which shows how we approach everything through a global lens. I mean, Asia would be great, too.

**Meredith:** I think early on we were really good at identifying leaders in their own right and bringing them into our company and letting them do their thing. It's not just looking at a category and going, 'We're going to get into that.' It only makes sense if it touches us, if it's evolving, and if we find the right people.

**Sarah:** It's going back to those two words that we've used *way* too much this morning: authenticity and really being strategic.

1. To celebrate the release of the *Super Mario Bros Movie*, Nintendo partnered with footwear maker Red Wing Shoes to recreate Mario's boots. According to the company, the heel pad is made 'with state-of-the-art mushroom-infused materials celebrating Mario's signature abilities.'

2. In 2017, Kendall Jenner was the key protagonist of a two-and-a-half-minute Pepsi ad in which she joins a protest and seems to defuse tensions with police officers by handing one a can of soda. Visually referencing important revolutionary protests in order to sell more soft drinks, the ad was called a 'glaring misstep' by *Time* magazine.

3. TOMS Shoes became famous in 2006 for its 'one-for-one' model, where the company promised to deliver a free pair of shoes to a child in need each time they sold a pair.

4. Founded in 2007, CTAOP (Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project) focuses on supporting African youth in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The foundation collaborates with local organizations, governments, and communities to provide support, education, and resources to prevent the spread of HIV.

# ‘There’s been a radical shift in who owns influence.’

**Talent powerhouse WME is evolving its engagement with fashion. Susan Plagemann, president of WME Fashion, is leading the evolution.**

**Interview by Jonathan Wingfield**
**Photograph by Peter Ash Lee**

Just over a hundred years ago, around the dawn of Chanel, and with the golden age of silent film in full swing, a German-Jewish immigrant to the US by the name of William Morris found an opportunity to represent creative talent and make a buck. Having spent the previous two decades as a vaudeville agent, Morris formally incorporated William Morris Agency in New York in 1918 and began representing the biggest film stars of the day: the likes of Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers and Mae West. Regarded as the first great talent agency in show business, WMA evolved and helped shape the face of entertainment. It made its first acquisition of another company – the Berg-Allenberg talent agency – in the late 1940s, joining Frank Capra, Clark Gable and Judy Garland to the roster, and in the 1960s acted as agent for pop stars including The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys and Sonny & Cher.

Throughout the decades that followed, the agency continued a mergers-and-acquisitions approach, pre-dating the strategic activity of a modern-day luxury conglomerate like LVMH or Kering. Merging with Endeavor in 2009 and acquiring IMG Models in 2013 – and many other agencies in-between and since – the company now represents the NFL alongside make-up artists, the Frieze Art Fair alongside supermodels, wrestlers and the UFC alongside literary talent. Today, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of creative agencies known as Endeavor has a fashion division, WME Fashion, that includes Art + Commerce (Steven Meisel, Grace Coddington, Guido, Willy Vanderperre, Peter Philips, Ib Kamara, Craig McDean...), IMG Models (Bella Hadid, Gemma Ward, Alek Wek, Irina Shayk, Alex Consani...), IMG Events (British Fashion Awards, London Fashion Week, Milano Moda Uomo...), and The Wall Group (Kate Young, Gucci Westman, Yusef Williams, Mary Greenwell, Emily Cheng...). As a result, it has become a one-stop shop that luxury brands can tap into, where its specialist agencies can crossover to seamlessly create a campaign, from who's in front to who's behind the camera. But not just brands benefit from this unique group structure – on the flip-side, if you're a photographer on the Art + Commerce roster and want to develop and work in, say, filmmaking, the division leaders of the wider Endeavor network can get together and instigate this career progression unlike any other business.

Keeping WME Fashion an industry-leading force is the task of Susan Plagemann, who joined as President of the division in 2022. A Condé Nast veteran, Plagemann was initially publisher of *Vogue* in 2010 before being appointed Chief Business Officer of the Style Division in 2018, leading the commercial sides of *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Allure*, and *Glamour*. Having been both witness to and active player in the rise of publications going digital, the disruption that social media brought to strategy, the increasing convergence of entertainment and fashion, and luxury brands' ever-changing creative needs in the face of all this, *System* was keen to sit down with Plagemann to understand, from her unique perspective, where it's all headed.

**'In the same way that I oversee fashion, we have individuals who run sports, music, books, television, motion pictures, theatre, endorsements, digital…'**

**Firstly, tell me about your role at WME Fashion.**
What WME Fashion represents is four companies: IMG Models, The Wall Group, Art + Commerce and IMG Fashion Events. Those four companies were acquired by our parent company Endeavor at various times, but there was never a crossover among them. When I was hired, my job was to take those four companies and bring them together while respecting and honouring their individual IPs and expertise. The three things that we're trying to do as a result of that is, one, we want to be best in class for our talent, which means we want talent to see us as strategic, thoughtful leaders ahead of the curve. We want them to see us as creative people who actually understand their world, and how to help them build their career, continue their career, or pivot their career.

Two, we want to be much further upstream with brands, which is an area I have a lot of expertise in, having come from the commercial side of the publishing world. In essence, our goal is to be proactive with the brands we're working with. When I started at WME Fashion, I spent the first year on the road visiting our global offices and meeting with CEOs, CMOs, creative directors and designers. It was a listening tour that would help our teams better understand each brand's priorities, their strategy, and how we could continue to collaborate. We have a lot of very long-standing, deep-seated relationships across the board in fashion, beauty, and luxury, and it was important for us to listen to those leaders, understand their direction, hear what they were hoping to achieve for the year ahead, and understand how they measure success. It was also an opportunity to share what WME Fashion could offer as a collective, and to show how WME Fashion works within the larger WME and Endeavor ecosystem. For instance, last year we started working on an anniversary project for an Italian brand which involves not only ideating what they should do; it involves talent, production around a location, tying in a creative director to help them execute on it, hair and makeup, celebrities: the entire thing.

The third thing is something that this company calls 'architecture', and that is, I think, really key to the success of WME. It's one of the most important points of our meaningful differentiation, what makes us so unique as a company. In the same way that I oversee our fashion portfolio, you have individuals who run sports, music, books, scripted and unscripted television, motion pictures, endorsements, digital, and theatre departments. A lot of times they will have individuals that they're signing, or they've signed and have said they want to get involved in fashion. Our goal is then to help them understand what that means, because fashion is a big word, and it can cover a lot of different things. And then we help them create a strategy around that. Similarly, it can go the other way. So, there could be an artist at Art + Commerce who wants to get into film, or maybe there is a model at IMG who actually wants to become a stylist. Or maybe they're a makeup artist at The Wall Group who wants to get into unscripted television. So, it's back and forth, and we're really fortunate because we have these impressive leaders in other areas who can help guide that.

**'We give our artists ten questions to answer: How do you define success? What are your favourite brands? Literally things to get into their psyche.'**

**Give me an example of when those people are in a room together and how that plays out, in terms of the exchanging of ideas and contacts?**
They're in rooms together all the time. I'm not privy to every single meeting, but I'll give you an example. There is a talent from The Wall Group who is super established, very successful, but who wants to look beyond what they're currently doing. So we pulled the team together, and that team consisted of someone from unscripted television, someone from the literary division, someone from the music division, and we had a brainstorm. We gave that artist ten questions we wanted them to answer. This isn't a questionnaire that we send out. It's a live conversation where we're like: How do you define success? What are your favourite brands? In your pastime, what is it that you enjoy most? Literally things to get into their psyche, like what creatively motivates them.

Then we'll take those answers, pull a team together, and we'll all sit and brainstorm ideas on how we can use those answers to create a strategy for that person. It's just approaching it differently because the company is really putting resources behind this type of thinking and effort. It's not, 'Okay, let me call a friend and see if we can get them in over here.' It's actually thoughtful and real. The decks they come back with are impressive, and I've yet to see an artist go, 'Oh, you failed.' We've had 99% of them say, 'Oh my gosh, wow, I had no idea.'

**This issue of *System* is exploring the evolving rapport between fashion and entertainment, and the scenario you've described is a palpable example of that. What are your thoughts on that evolution, how the fashion industry and entertainment talent have become increasingly intertwined?**
Well, fashion certainly isn't new to WME. IMG Models has been around for 36 years. The Wall Group 23 years, Art + Commerce 42 years, and IMG Fashion Events 22 years. How the company as a whole is organizing itself around fashion is what has evolved. I think that's an important distinction in terms of how these worlds have been converging for a long time. I mean, celebrities have been on the covers of fashion magazines, and front row at shows, and a part of campaigns for a very long time. But I think it just continues to crescendo. Given where I was working before and where I am now, I certainly have had a front row seat to really see how that accelerated. It all ties back to one thing: storytelling. As our company sits at the nexus of fashion and world-class storytellers, we see a lot of potential in bringing the worlds of fashion and entertainment closer together. Our clients are content distributors and e-commerce centres in their own right, and WME Fashion's ability to move them across the worlds of fashion and entertainment provides new financial and creative opportunities for them. At the end of the day, our

key to success is how we help our talent tell great stories or express themselves in ways that people want to consume, be entertained by, or bring them joy.

**You mentioned travelling the world and meeting with contacts who oversee the decision-making in fashion, beauty, and luxury brands. What did you learn from your discussions?**
I think the biggest overarching thing that we heard was the potential for the ease of execution of what we offer. And what we offer is a place with a group of people that really understand your business, how it works, the ebbs and flows, the importance of timing, how things have to be delivered, the importance of the brand and protecting it alongside its aesthetic. We work with multi-million, billion-dollar companies that work hard to protect who they are and what they represent, so to have someone roll in and touch that, you want to make sure that they understand and are equipped to do the job.

> **‘An Art + Commerce artist wants to get into film, a Wall Group makeup artist wants to get into unscripted TV, an IMG model want to be a stylist…’**

Two other areas of focus for brands are innovation and talent. Brands recognize the importance of working with and investing in talent as storytellers on behalf of their brands to connect with their audience. We're seeing more and more brands tap into the voices of talent who they may not have traditionally considered and that strategy has proven fruitful – whether that be engaging with more athletes or tapping into digital creators.

**What are the metrics of success for your work with talent or a brand?**
For the talent we represent, it is definitely satisfaction, that they're happy, that they feel creatively driven, challenged and motivated. That they feel we are listening and taking care of them. I think for brands it's more a question of building business partnerships with them as opposed to one-offs; ones that we can evergreen and keep coming back to.

**In your own previous professional experiences, can you recall some landmark moments when you observed – or indeed instigated – fashion really playing a fundamental role in shaping contemporary popular culture? And conversely when popular entertainment started really shaping fashion?**
Roughly eight years ago, there was a breakthrough moment when Gucci switched designers and we created an entire program for them based off a marketing idea on how to wear and wardrobe the new designer. Titled ‘100 ways to wear Gucci’, it was so successful that it became their entire platform for North America, and then their global effort for the year. It was a big storytelling moment for the brand and its success was powerful – being able to understand their needs and create something that was unequivocally different from anything else they had seen was so rewarding.

**In your career path, you've moved from media to agency – crudely put, from content to talent. What do you think your own career pivot symbolizes about the broader shifts in dynamics and power at the heart of the fashion and entertainment industries?**
I think influence has changed and there's also been a radical shift in who owns that influence, and I think that will continue. I was just reading an article about two new platforms, and I was thinking about when TikTok started and everyone was kind of tentatively thinking, ‘Well, let's see about this…’, and now look at its influence on how people communicate. There are brands putting 100% of their focus on TikTok. It's game changing. But I still think that talent continues to be at the core of that storytelling for brands and companies. The platforms themselves aren't telling the story – it's the talent on those platforms who are telling the story.

**Do you remember a key moment when social media started to play a really significant role?**
I remember when Instagram came on the scene and it was really this overnight sensation in terms of people adapting to it, using it, posting on it. As someone who was stewarding a very big, important brand [*Vogue*] in the fashion ecosystem, I remember thinking very quickly: ‘We have to be there. But how can we be there without cannibalising what we do? How can we be there where it becomes a continuation of what we do?’ But definitely, I would say, for me anyway, personally and professionally, Instagram was the one that really felt like a gamechanger.

**Celebrity collabs with luxury fashion brands are increasingly prevalent. What do you consider they represent?**
I think the goal always has to be that it's a genuine exchange. I think what happens is that creative people need additional outlets. People meet, exchange ideas, and execute on them. I don't think that you can put together something that's a gimmick and sell it at that level and have it be successful. I think it genuinely comes from people meeting and building a rapport, finding an intersection between the two of them that actually results in something new.

**Can you describe your first ‘pinch me’ moment in your career; when you couldn't believe you were getting paid to do what you were doing?**
I remember going to my first New York Fashion Week show, Isaac Mizrahi, when I worked at *Mademoiselle* magazine. It was before photographers were in a pit so they were all lined around the stage. I vividly remember a RuPaul song coming on and the girls – among them Christy, Naomi and Cindy – walking down the runway. I just couldn't believe that this was actually part of my job.

**Who's given you the best advice across your career?**
Valerie Salembier – former SVP, Publisher and Chief Revenue Officer of *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire* and *Town & Country* – was an incredible boss and is one of my mentors. We still talk – she's someone that brought me into all the rooms and meetings that I probably had no business being in, but she believed in me and did it. To this day, I really feel like I owe her a lot.

**What do you think this era will be remembered for in, say, 20-25 years?**
Speed, agility, and innovation.

**Finally, what do you think it takes to become a great agent at WME?**
Great agents and talent managers are well-read, they know what's going on in the world beyond their sector and have a deep understanding of what's happening in culture. They are tenacious self-starters who are curious, have an eye for unique talent, and an understanding of how to strategically build someone's personal brand. The most successful have incredible relationships, are creative in their thinking and solution-oriented, and are willing to push the boundaries. They don't back down when they get a no. What sets WME apart is our unique ability to build multihyphenates – we don't believe talent can be great at only one thing, we want to harness the potential for creatives to explore all aspects of the industry.

# ‘People like Björk give you the tools to make mad things happen.’

**Anna Meacham’s Huxley agency is something like a meeting place, easing the connections between composer Max Richter and Kim Jones at Dior, or the link between Frank Ocean and Miuccia Prada.**

**Interview by Jonathan Wingfield**
**Portrait by Jo Metson Scott**

Since its launch in 2018, Huxley, Anna Meacham's London agency has blazed a unique trail through the world of PR. Most obviously, there are the clients – a compact list of big names: including Björk, Frank Ocean, Megan Thee Stallion, Diplo, Charli XCX, A24 films, Marcus Rashford; around 30 clients to date. Then there is the breadth: the concentrated talent in this tight group covers a vastly eclectic swathe of industries, from hip-hop to cinema, classical music to fashion, performance art to football, graphic design to food. The characteristics that connect these entities apply as readily to the agency itself: a certain resistance to categorization, an almost stubborn self-expression, a *soupçon* of something subcultural, now prized in the mainstream.

Shrugging the label of 'PR agency', Huxley self-styles as a 'globally connected partner to talent, brands and organisations' whose role, beyond managing public image, is to catalyze collaboration across industries, and help creatives find their full expression, to everybody's benefit. More than a gatekeeper, Huxley is something like a meeting place, easing the connections between composer Max Richter and Dior Homme's Kim Jones, or the link between Frank Ocean and Miuccia Prada. Crossing categories comes naturally to Meacham, who cut her teeth as a heavy-metal-loving teenager in Manchester, creating band T-shirts for girls in a very male world. Fearless and open-minded, with an eye for an untapped market, is Meacham creating a new kind of agency, primed to shape (and benefit from) the intersection of fashion and entertainment?

## 'I could only buy men's heavy-metal band T-shirts, so we'd cut them up, customize them, and make girls merch that we distributed through Myspace.'

**How do you describe what you do, and what Huxley does?**
We build around people and around brands. That can seem a bit mysterious because every single one of those people or brands has a completely different need or goal. But they are our north stars, and we advocate for them; in some cases to amplify, and in some cases to retract. Our expertise is the public-facing side of the work, but, by nature, that includes everything that is in the dark as well, that people don't see.

**It sounds like the work is defined on a case-by-case basis. Do you find that when you first meet someone, the mission very quickly sets itself in place?**
Yes, I think so. We tend to have really long partnerships with people. I set up Huxley five years ago and I was so lucky that when I started the business, I had clients who had worked with me since I was 18. Our approach has always been to talk about things in terms of career and life legacy, and then work backwards to the next three months, the next month, et cetera. We have very open, strategic, specific conversations with everyone we're working with or thinking about working with, and that informs our systems of working. Everyone has a different life situation, a different career situation, and the beauty of working with human beings as opposed to brands is that in that relational side of it there's a sort of tension – a good tension – that never sits still, is always moving.

**It's interesting that you think as long term as a client's life legacy. Can you give me an example of that?**
Yes, even after just one event or performance: 'How are people going to think about that? What does it mean in the world, or to that person?' For example, in the past 18 months, we started working with Max Richter, who is the biggest classical composer of our time. He is incredible, and even though a lot of people are aware of him, I don't think enough people have understood the range of what he can offer the world. He composes incredible records, he works for Hollywood and the film industry, he also has an incredible relationship with Kim Jones at Dior Homme, and with LVMH. He is building a whole world in the visual space, and then he is really involved in climate change and sustainability. One of our goals is to help the world understand that he is one of the most important creatives and cultural figures of our time. So, it is about building around him, opening doors, and creating opportunities for that to happen.

**What role does Huxley play in building those bridges between worlds?**
One thing I am proud of, is that we don't just specialize in one sector. So, maybe a client really wants to get involved in policy change, and we'll have the connections, the network and the language to build those bridges. And that could apply to fashion, music, sport, design – any industry.

There is an exchange, a dialogue. We'll be like, 'Have you read this or this? Do you know this gallery?' And then it all comes together, so that you are building an ecosystem and infrastructure which is greater than the initial spark. For example, we recently brought together Max Richter and Alastair McKimm to work together on the visual world for an upcoming musical project that Max is working on. Both Max and Alastair are visionaries in their respective worlds but have much more to offer than is probably expected of a contemporary classical composer or someone working within fashion. I'm so excited to see how their separate disciplines can collide. Another example that springs to mind was when we introduced Charli XCX to Katie Grand at a party, and they just immediately locked in. And Charli and Jonathan Anderson adore each other, they are thick as thieves. We introduced Adwoa Aboah, when she was doing the *Gurls Talk* podcast[1], to Malala [Yousafzai], and to Gina Martin, who took a bill about upskirting to parliament and made it illegal.[2] Just this morning we connected Jamie Oborne who owns Dirty Hit – one of the world's leading independent record labels, which releases all the records by The 1975 – with Cyrill Gutsch from Parley for the Oceans[3], who has found a way to produce vinyl from plastic found in the Maldives. We build those bridges all the time.

## 'Every lunchtime I would walk up and down Bond Street, looking at Prada, Lanvin; studying shop windows just to get these names in my head.'

**How are you able to monetize that?**
We are paid retainers by our clients, and we get commission based on the work we do. But I'm really open with my network; I'm not scared to share a contact and make an introduction. It always comes back in positive ways. I had a meeting once with a director of WME, Dave Wirtschafter, who comes over to London for Wimbledon every year, and at the end he said to me, 'But you didn't ask for anything!' I really took that away with me. He also told me that if someone leaves your business, get them their next job. Good advice!

**One of the most striking things about Huxley is the breadth and diversity of its roster of talent. What would you put this down to?**
When I started the business, I came from Purple PR, an agency that was amazing, but big. I started as an intern and worked my way up to heading the entertainment division under the founder. It was hard to keep up with what 150 individual creative people were doing; I was aware of everyone on the roster, but it was hard to be in the weeds with them. So, when I started Huxley, I wanted to work with fewer people, all of whom are dynamic and ambitious and think about the world beyond the present. The people I'm drawn to are polymaths; they're not just in one sector. I think media and brands understand that it's about excellence, but also credibility, and I think that's what ties everyone together.

**Are there specific traits that link Megan Thee Stallion, The 1975, A24 film studio, Homer, Marcus Rashford, Björk, and Zak Group?**
All of them go beyond what you would expect of a movie studio, a pop star, a musician, or an athlete. I think everyone that we represent is trying to do something meaningful and positive. It is not just about fame, or making money, or ticking off your personal achievements. There is a purpose. I would say that is core. Celebrity culture has always been huge, since it was ever a thing, but there's no question that young kids now are following their favourite pop stars or models as role models. Someone like Paloma Elsesser is just an incredible role model for young girls, but also for designers, and people who have been in the industry forever.

**Imagine I'm a great artist – someone who's credible, with a unique point of view and a global reach. What's your elevator pitch to me to come and join your roster at Huxley?**
Our job is to have your corner. So, it's not really an elevator pitch, but we do put our cards on the table about who we are and check we are aligned about what we can do. We want them to believe in us as much as we believe in them. Just because someone is successful doesn't mean we're going to be the right fit for one another.

**Is that one of the principal ways your clients might feel the distinction between what Huxley offers them and what more 'old-school' powerhouse talent agencies represent?**
I have always felt like a bit of an outsider to the music, fashion, and sports industries and the whole team we are building here is very much the same. I see that as a big benefit. We are not obsessed with the politics of one particular industry, and everyone has their own take on things. As regards agencies in general, I think PR agencies need to start backing themselves a bit more, we need to rate ourselves and charge proper fees. A lot of people undercharge, and I think that's a shame.

**How do you feel about scaling up the number of people on your roster?**
We definitely are scaling. In addition to London, we have teams in New York and in Paris, but our intention is to keep everything family style, with a human connection in parallel to our business arrangements. Scaling doesn't necessarily mean the numbers of desks or names on our roster; I see it more as scaling our network, expertise and reach.

**Name an artist you'd love to work with.**
I love Jonathan Anderson. He is so bright; I love his approach to his work. I'm really interested in Justin Bieber. Similar thing with Bella Hadid; the opportunities with her are just incredible. We often talk in our team about the 'new era of content creators'. But I actually think the term 'content creator' kind of boxes in what people like Cindy Kimberly and Gabbriette are capable of doing. It's just too reductive.

> **'You're serving the client, being in the background, wearing black. We say 'no' a lot – a hell of a lot – but then we'll call back and say 'What about this?''**

**Gabbriette and Bella Hadid are very different cases. Could Huxley make an approach to Bella Hadid without stepping on the toes of her model agency?**
We are always collaborating with partners – whether they're model agencies, record labels or football clubs. Our approach is to be positive, collaborative team players because we just want the best work and the best output. Paloma Elsesser works with IMG, and we're really close with her agent Mina White there, who is a complete visionary. We talk all day, every day, about how we can best serve Paloma. We don't want to enter into exchanges with people where there isn't that genuine dialogue.

**Does working with Marcus Rashford differ from with models or creatives?**
Athletes are phenomenal human beings; they have to be so disciplined for a higher purpose, especially for a footballer like Marcus who serves his club and his country. So, there is no selfish gene in that: he is a team player all the way. That's great, because that's a really clear bottom line to start from. He has his training and his sponsors, so he can't just go off to a fashion show. And his agent is his brother, Dane, who is brilliant at helping us navigate that world. We have a great relationship with Manchester United and we talk every day and make plans. We started working with Marcus in January and the most important thing is to serve the game, and make sure he is not distracted. Just last week we were in Manchester, sat down with his sponsors and the club and his agent, to set out the mission and what we want to achieve. Marcus is senior on the team, but he has been signed to that club since he was seven. That journey isn't really comparable to any other industry. We want the world to understand that he is one of the football greats, but off the pitch, he legitimately brings things in for his community. It is about bringing all of that together.

**What can you do that Manchester United doesn't already?**
We manage the relationship with Macmillan, the publishing house that does his books for kids, which go from fantasy fiction to workbooks about self-belief which hopefully arm the next generation with some of the tools that he feels he didn't have. Then we make sure he has the opportunity to connect with different people. He came to Paris to attend Pharrell's Louis Vuitton debut, which introduced him to new people and put him on a different stage. His club commitments will always be the priority, but Marcus was also the face of Burberry, and he has a partnership with Nike as an athlete. You know, I love seeing how the different industries perceive one another. Sometimes I'll sit in fashion rooms, and they are all talking about a record, and I'm like, 'Really? *That* record?' And then in a music industry room, they'll be raving about a certain designer who's underrated elsewhere. I like the differences. I think we're very good at that translation.

**Which specific artists, brands or scenes were you first drawn to when you were a teenager, forming your tastes and aesthetic choices?**
I was really into heavy metal from about 13 or 14. I grew up in Manchester and there was a lot of that subculture when I was a teenager. I was drawn to it because it was slightly outside of the norm, and there's a lot of innovation in music that's on the fringes of society. For example, I was fascinated by the tape-trading scene; I used to collect magazines and make collages; and there was Napster, Myspace and Messenger, which opened the world to me. I could make friends in the Czech Republic who wanted to hear a cool band from Manchester. When I was 15, I was getting annoyed that I could only buy these really baggy men's T-shirts with my favourite heavy metal bands on, so me and my friend started this business where we would cut them up and customize them, and make female-led merchandise that we distributed through Myspace. We were young women in a male-dominated industry, and guys would be condescending, like, 'You don't know about this music.' That was a good way to learn how to stand our ground. I made enough pocket money, and it was a good foundation for my approach to community building now.

> **'I love seeing how different industries perceive one another. I'll be in fashion rooms, and they're all raving about a record, and I'm like, '*Really*?!''**

**When did you first think about pursuing a professional career in entertainment and culture?**
When I was a little girl, there were TV shows like *Pop Idol*, *Popstars* and *X-Factor* and I would have loved to have been in a band like the Spice Girls. I saw people like Pete Waterman and Simon Cowell, and was, like, 'Oh, that's a job where you can have some power.' It's not a glamorous entry point, but I started to understand that there was an industry behind that world, that there were record labels and booking agents. It got to a point where I was having to make decisions about education, but I decided that I would love to work around artists, so I found an internship at Purple PR in London. I thought I was going to work in the music division, but ended up in fashion. We had Beyoncé's brand, House of Dereon, as a client, so I was, like, 'Wow, I work for Beyoncé now, I'm folding Beyoncé jeans!' Then I became acquainted with the CEO of the entertainment business, and he asked if I wanted to go into music.

**What do you think they saw in you?**
I think I was just up for it. I was, like, 'I'm here to work.' I learned from people within the business; we worked with Prince, we launched Adele's career, we worked with tiny bands. We had to deal with every kind of person, at every scale, in every industry, and I learned to be resilient and to take joy from it.

**What was your first embarrassing moment in the business, when your inexperience revealed itself?**
When I was interning, I understood fashion in a cultural sense but I wasn't really aware of the brands – there had been no luxury in my family house. I started to understand there was a language and system of brands that really mattered. So every lunchtime I would walk up and down Bond Street, looking at Prada, Lanvin, and so on, studying shop windows just to get these names in my head. I definitely felt it was a weakness, that I hadn't come from a world of luxury. There was a part of me that wanted access to that world, because I didn't like it that the door was closed, that I didn't have friends who worked for those brands. I had a fight in me to get through those doors.

**When you started Huxley in 2018, were there reference points you looked to, in terms of direction or strategy?**
I like how art galleries build their brand and their output. They are super protective, and that's always been inspiring. I really admire the greats in our industry, like Karla [Otto]. And I have been working with Björk for 15 years, and she has always pushed the boundaries. I want to connect the dots like her, to know my values like her.

**Is Björk your longest client?**
Yes. Björk and Frank Ocean. Björk just gives you the tools to make mad things happen. One of her records, *Vulnicura*, was released in complete virtual reality and that was a riot to promote, because we were sitting down with publishers and being, like, 'Can you make a virtual reality magazine cover?'

**When do you think fashion became part of pop culture and when did pop culture become fashionable?**
I feel like music artists have always visually expressed themselves, especially in performance. But there have been individuals who have really eloquently brought those worlds together, like Lady Gaga: she isn't just in a costume, she's making intelligent references to the archives of designers. Kanye West has done that, too. They have set a standard for other musicians. Certain musicians and actors and artists are on another level of creativity, and Marc Jacobs, Jonathan [Anderson], and Donatella Versace are visionaries on that level, too. So when you bring two of them together, it becomes this synchronized moment.

**What are the benefits of those moments?**
It might nourish you or open the door to making a better record. The tastes of people in different fields often align, and it can be very exciting when you see visionaries clash together.

**How does that play out?**
Sometimes painfully! No, honestly, it's that respect thing. It can be a mission, because you are getting two or more incredible and confident people with

great ideas into a room to collaborate. I'm sure there are lots of failed attempts at that, but it can be really fruitful.

**In previous eras, musicians collaborating with big commercial brands was considered a 'sell out', but fashion now represents an important revenue stream to artists. Why do you think things have changed?**
Society has changed a hell of a lot. I think that money has become highly aspirational. Sometimes there are partnerships that we do with a client, where I know that in the past we'd have worried about alienating fans, but actually the fans these days really like it; they want to see their idols rising and building their business.

**Can you give me an example.**
Ghetto Gastro are a culinary collective from the Bronx. Community is key to them, so we work with them on things like a community garden they're involved in, and throwing block parties. But they've also rolled out products at 1,900 Target stores: waffle mixes, breakfast pastries, and syrups. So it's taking these three guys who are very community-first and geographically-specific and making them into global thought leaders. They'll be on the cover of a niche magazine like *Office*, but then they'll be on the Drew Barrymore show. The mission is to transcend where they come from, so they become leaders in business, not just food.

> **'PR agencies need to back themselves more, we need to rate ourselves and charge proper fees. Lots of agencies undercharge, which is a shame.'**

**Can you talk about Jack Antonoff?**
Jack is a relatively new client, and as a music producer he has a catalogue of work that includes some of the best records in the last decade. He has been in studios with Taylor Swift, Lorde, Lana Del Rey. With him, our approach is about transcending expectations; he is a great writer, a big part of the broader New York scene of art galleries, policy makers, business leaders. It is about bringing him into the spotlight, because he deserves to be a thought leader and keynote speaker in the music industry.

**What do you think fashion offers to your clients?**
For our clients, on a pure, brutal marketing level – in terms of reach – fashion has a lot of power. But for fashion houses, our clients deliver authenticity and a human connection to consumers. There's been an important power shift in the relationships with fashion brands, where people also take their very personal values into consideration. We have lots of difficult conversations with CMOs and publicists, saying that something is not authentic, that it doesn't represent the person.

**What about the financial transaction in all this? Could you give an idea of the figures of what's at stake?**
To be honest, there is no logical rhyme or reason when the CMOs come to see us. But those kinds of deals are usually a high-six-figure, low-seven-figure deal, with a royalty attached. It's a marketing exchange, so it really does vary enormously. You have to weigh up the opportunity and exposure for our client in question, but you can't sell out. We feel like we know our bottom line.

**What is it about your artists that makes them such avatars of global aspiration?**
It's both the emotional connection and the fact that cultural figures are role models; you want to reflect a bit of what they represent in the world. Musicians, artists, and athletes have tastes beyond commerce. They often have a good sense of what looks cool.

**What have you learnt about the lives of celebrities having worked in such close proximity to them?**
I'm always amazed by the way public-facing people have this self-belief. They put their really personal work out into the world, and they bare their soul. You know, this is something I spend a lot of time thinking about. I can look at everyone we represent and think: what else would they do, if they didn't do what they do? Like Björk – what else would she do? Every element of her life is a work of art. That's what I'm here to serve, and I do see it as a privilege, because these people are different: maybe it is extreme talent or extreme self-belief; it's like some people can't hold it in. I think everyone has the capacity to be an artist, but some people are just on another level. With athletes, too. I love hearing the stories Dane tells us about when Marcus was a kid, playing football. They all played but Marcus was next level.

**What are the important factors for an artist's longevity?**
Quality output and understanding the changing world, because the way stories are told is changing every day. One day something is okay and the next day it's not. One day this company is on top of the world and the next day it has filed for bankruptcy. Being responsive to the world around us is really key. You don't have to change yourself because of it, but you do have to be aware of it.

**Could you imagine a time when a successful artist might emerge that has no specific geographic or cultural provenance? Where the only significant metric of success is their desirability in the digital world?**
We worked with Lil Miquela, [the online, fictional character] made by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, and it was a really interesting philosophical thing that they did. We were Miquela's representatives for a year; we took her to the fashion awards maybe four or five years ago. She met Mrs Prada, we had her on the cover of magazines, it was really good fun. I absolutely think there is a future for avatars and so on, and I guess everything has an origin of some kind. I was trained in PR to look at every angle of the person you represent, and where they are from is definitely important. But something can still exist on a different playing field.

**How do you differentiate what you do from straight PR?**
We like to describe ourselves as representation; we are a very personalized service. Concierge, research, art direction; there isn't a language for our industry. You are very much serving the client, being in the background, wearing black. We say 'no' a lot – a hell of a lot – but then we also call people and say 'What about this?'

**Given your position on the front line of today's world of entertainment, what do you think this period will be characterized by or remembered for in 20 years' time?**
Change. Huge and significant technological, economic, and societal changes. I think we are going to see a big shift and it has already started. There are cons to that, but there are pros, as well. Looking back to the 1990s, when I grew up, it was such a pop-culture obsessed time. Maybe that changed in the noughties. I look at a lot of the younger people in my team and they're less interested in coming to the parties with me. They seem more into TikTok. It's a different way of consuming, and it's definitely powerful.

1. Between 2018 and 2021, Adwoa Aboah released 61 episodes of her podcast *Gurls Talk*, including conversations with Rosalía, Rupi Kaur, and Serena Williams.

2. In 2017, during a music festival in London's Hyde Park, Gina Martin discovered that a man had taken a picture of her underwear from under her skirt. Martin took his phone and ran to the police, who told her the act wasn't illegal and therefore they couldn't take any action. An activism campaign ensued, which resulted in the UK Voyeurism (Offences) Act being introduced in 2018 and coming into force in 2019.

3. Parley for the Oceans is a nonprofit environmental organization that focuses on protecting the oceans. Working with leaders in creative industries to instigate change, they have partnered with brands including Dior, Adidas, and Iris van Herpen, who each included Parley's Ocean Plastic materials in their collections.

# ‘Travis Scott is a brand as much as Dior.’

## Brock Korsan – the West Coast A&R guru behind Kendrick Lamar and Drake – on why ‘music sells fashion better than anything else.’

Interview by Rahim Attarzadeh
Photographs by Max Farago

A&R people have long been the talent scouts of the music industry, the outriders, whose choices map the route for record labels to follow. And just as the industry has been forced to reinvent itself in the wake of the streaming revolution, the enigmatic role of the A&R has dramatically evolved: from anonymous gatekeeper to tastemaker, talent manager, cultural connector. Brock Korsan incarnates the spirit of this new generation, channelling the zeitgeist through a coterie of collaborators who themselves embody the seismic shift of hip-hop from subculture to the mainstream: Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Travis Scott, Omar Apollo, ScHoolboy Q, The Alchemist. Having held positions at Warner Records, Def Jam Recordings, Atlantic Records and Columbia Records – or, as he calls them, ‘the big four’ – the West Coast impresario has been at the forefront of an industry increasingly engaged in cross-category collaboration, where musical artists emphasize their visual presence and personal brand, and fashion amps up its embrace of spectacle and experience. Think Kendrick Lamar performing at the Louis Vuitton Men’s Spring/Summer 2023 show, or Travis Scott’s *Cactus Jack* Summer 2022 Dior collection. Korsan’s modus operandi is to help musicians break the cycle of studio, album, promo, world tour (repeat), to explore the fertile overlap of film, art, fashion, design, curation and entrepreneurship. And he’s a well-placed evangelist for this multi-disciplinary approach, as co-founder of No Vacancy Inn, the globetrotting creative collective (alongside Tremaine Emory and Ade ‘Acyde’ Odunlami) where music, fashion, and nightlife collide, bringing musicians such as Frank Ocean and A$AP Rocky together with creatives like Tom Sachs and Matthew Williams, while collaborating with Marni’s Francesco Risso for a 2023 capsule collection, or on collections with Stüssy. *System* caught up with Korsan to discuss how to garner attention in an oversaturated market, and why no artist really wants to be ‘independent’.

**How would you describe what you do?**
I’m an artist helper. If you want a technical answer, I’m A&R. I feel like I’m somebody who gets an artist to their destination. I could be a gypsy cab, I could be a rickshaw. I find artists and talent that I’m attracted to and I assist them in getting to a place where we all feel that they should be.

> **‘I’m an artist helper. I feel like I’m somebody who gets an artist to their destination. I could be a gypsy cab, I could be a rickshaw.’**

**When did music and fashion become part of pop culture? And when did pop culture become fashionable?**
Ironically, individuality or expression through clothing is usually born from wanting to be someone else. For me, and a lot of people that came from my demographic, MTV coming out enabled you to actually see a visual representation of the artist that you were listening to. Whereas before there was TV, concerts weren’t televised and we didn’t have 24/7 access to music information like we do now. You would see artists on tour or read the *GQ* or *Rolling Stone* article and that formed your gateway into that world. Obviously, we didn’t know that artists were being styled, you were just led to believe that was how they looked all the time. Music sells fashion better than anything else. Music and fashion is right shoe, left shoe. You can’t really dress like your favourite basketball player every day. You can’t wear sports uniforms everywhere you go, so you have to look to musicians for inspiration. It’s been that way since the 1950s. The starting point for the emergence of pop culture shows music as the dominant catalyst for sociocultural awareness, making us, the consumer, become increasingly aware of image as time and technology progress.

**As someone who operates outside the conventions of traditional A&R, what draws you to such disparate projects?**
I’ve always had a keen eye for aesthetics and it’s something that has come naturally to me. I’m very opinionated about things that I have a distaste for, which makes my process easier. If I see something that I like, I will get involved. I don’t see any limitations just because I’m A&R. That’s just how I am. It’s more exploratory for me. Everything I do is driven by an underlying curiosity. ‘Is it fashion? Is it music? Is it art?’ Well, everything is a by-product of the ‘Big Three’ nowadays, because we draw on all of those things when we collaborate. It’s the new hybridity and I like to think I operate between all of those practices. That could be because music has become relatively easy for the current generation to navigate. They are the consumer and they want more. When I was growing up, we weren’t necessarily afforded that luxury. People consume music in a similar way to how they consume fashion. If I can develop a small but discerning microcosm as to how I ‘feed the consumer machine’, then that’s progress; it’s not about fighting the machine, it’s about how you feed the machine. I see things and I act upon a sense of immediacy. If there’s something that I like, I can see how a collaboration could take place long before the ideation phase.

**What do you think about those stereotypes of an A&R role and how do you think the practice has evolved today?**
It’s completely different now. No one is currently discovering anybody and then signing them to a label. Everything’s done prior to signing. Good, bad, or indifferent. It just means that everyone has access to the same information, and music is being broken down and consumed in different ways. No one signs up to music they don’t like. Now, with the blurring of music, fashion, art and overall product, it’s far more difficult to navigate an oversaturated market and therefore far more esoteric. There are so many artists making music now. Before, you had to put up a lot of money, go in there to create a demo with a glimmer of hope that someone would listen to it. You didn’t have the same access that you have now. It was more a case of whether you could afford to buy a microphone at a Best Buy and say, ‘Okay, I’m gonna make music today.’ You had to save up a bunch of money and practise with your band in a garage and then scrape up more money to cut your demo. You already knew the songs you were cutting way in advance, you practised them a million times.

> **‘‘Is it fashion? Is it music? Is it art?’ Everything is a by-product of the ‘Big Three’, because we draw on all of those things when we collaborate.’**

**To what extent has the influence of social media and technology made the process less discerning, or led you to believe that people don’t really have an opinion at all?**
It’s not so much social media but more the immediacy of access to technology because it’s ultimately software that has made the artist discovery process feel more cosmetically manufactured. The curiosity of people to think naturally, or show any instinct has become a hindrance to the process. Maybe it’s a money thing. I’d like to think what I do is fuelled by curiosity, or shrewdly maximizes the potential of an artist’s creative reach but that has changed the way that A&R operates. You’ve got the big four labels. How many A&R guys can you have in those companies to scour the earth for artists, or songs, or people that are all logging on and marketing their work in the same place? So, discovery becomes increasingly data-driven. It changes the pure artistry perspective of A&R because I might hear something that I like and think that that artist has the talent to break through and I go to sign them to a label and they look at me like, ‘There’s not enough data here, there’s not enough money being made on it to suggest that they deserve this deal.’

**So, the data analytics, or technology-driven approach you’re describing when it comes to artist development has in some respects made the music industry feel more ephemeral?**
Yes and no. If you look at any of the artists that are hugely successful, they’re not data discoveries. The overnight stuff… the artists that just put out a song that immediately goes astronomical on the internet, or on TikTok and all this kind of stuff, they don’t tend to be around in a few years. That’s the harsh reality of those scenarios. The internet has given this power to champion things that are more polarizing. I call it quick fast food, or McCool. With everything being viral, that type of bandwidth is impermanent. There’s a viral moment every other day. There’s a dichotomy here because whilst we recognize the ephemerality of the ‘overnight digital success’, the idea of what is deemed successful because of the internet can be applied to almost anything. That viral success story feels to me like an entry-level marketing tool. Data made cults global – everybody’s already bought their favourite band T-shirt, so it’s up to the music industry to give you a reason to buy another one.

**I would like to address the debate surrounding the empowering of creativity within music. On one hand, there is the belief that the big label is king, and within the label there are moveable pieces. There is another school of thought that the independent labels have more influence because they are more curatorial in the talent they decide to work with, driving artist equity and commercial strategy. Where do you stand on all this?**
I think that all of the major record labels used to think like independent labels at one time because they *were* independent labels. They just ended up getting major funding. I think what’s great about the independent labels like XL, Caius Pawson’s Young, even Kendrick Lamar’s [previous label] TDE is that each one presents you with their

lens and a curated group of artists that they're personally attached to. They shift art-market practice across broader levels of society. The independent labels provide connoisseurship because the people who work there are connoisseurs within their respective practices. Each time they sign a new artist, they are making a rare and selective acquisition, which is the same to them as buying a Rothko or a Basquiat painting. You're getting somebody's taste. If I started a label right now, I'm putting out stuff that represents my taste. You're not going to see 55 different types of artists on my label that run across the board. Those independent labels that I referred to have all been born from the perspective of their founders. I don't think an A&R goes to XL trying to sign a death metal band.

**'Each time an independent label signs a new artist, they're making a rare and selective acquisition, which is the same to them as buying a Rothko.'**

**How do you think the music industry has evolved over the past decade? Where artists are now being described as 'multi-hyphenates' collaborating with clothing brands and creating beauty products?**
I think that's a natural progression for artists. Artists and musicians have always been great commodifiers. So, I think the leverage they have now is much greater, and they know it. It only works in the long-term if it comes naturally. It's like T-shirt brands, I don't really think that anyone needs another T-shirt brand. T-shirts sell because the consumer identifies with the person behind the canvas. Take Supreme, for example. In truth, a lot of people who buy a Supreme T-shirt don't really have an opinion on the design but they identify with the brand so they sometimes buy it. If those same designs were to have a different label on them, people might pass them by. A great artist is like an influential brand: they create beacons of affiliation because there's a lot of sludge out there. I don't think everyone needs to go and carry a product with their name on it but I feel like if you have an inclination to do so, and you want to create a product that is either not out there, or better than what is currently out there, then I think that is honourable. Travis Scott is a brand as much as he is an artist, or as much as Dior is a brand, or as Damien Hirst is a brand. They're all brands and that goes back to the new hybridity I was referring to. We've all been made into brands by audiences identifying with us as a kind of avatar to navigate the current pop culture landscape. There's no denying that people are here right now to get money, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. If someone is going to give you money to put your name on something, I don't know a lot of people who are going to say no.

**The fashion industry has become an important revenue stream to musicians. In the past, collaborating with luxury brands was considered 'selling out'. Now that this intersection feels part of the norm, this kind of work is no longer a necessary evil, rather it has become a fundamental brand and artist-building strategy. What are your thoughts on this?**
I think it's more to do with the cross-collateralization of fan bases. We live in a time where everything is for sale. Artists put out a ton of material these days. Brands are going off-calendar more than ever; putting up special products… amidst all of the things for sale, how do you create demand and how do you not get lost in this sea of consumerism? Even as a popular brand, you have to constantly come up with ways to flag interest. So, to help people know which artist they should be listening to, artists have been inadvertently marketed as 'default guides', or brands. What we are seeing today is the evolution of branding in order to maintain desirability over a captive audience that craves anything associated with their beloved artist. That's a way to take a fan base to another fan base or to democratize strong fan bases and bring them together to create cultural capital. I don't think that music and fashion can operate in an anti-establishment way anymore because of this hybridity between disciplines. In the 1970s, when artists were concerned with presenting an image of themselves as anti-establishment, this generated an uncharted sensation to be in a place where those establishments weren't deeming you important. Nowadays, everyone craves importance. Who's willing to say 'fuck that' or 'fuck them'?

**That doesn't seem to happen so much anymore…**
Because they're being paid attention to now. Everyone has a voice now. The music industry was fucking easy compared to how it is now. It must be problematic being a teenager because now everything is already out there for you. When you can't have something and you're young, if you don't like it, you're therefore not going to force yourself to like something. You're not going to sit there and constantly carry the flag against it. Whereas if you're an aspiring artist and you feel overlooked by a label that you really want to be looking at you, you're going to do everything in and out of your comfort zone to create waves. So, I think a lot of it was having a big disdain for something that represents something that you hate. Luxury brands are tapping into artists more than ever to sell things and artists are contractually being paid all this money to wear these brands. It's a situation of, 'Why don't we work together and figure out a way to make *more* money?'

**'We're living in an era where you see people locally wearing *that* Balenciaga T-shirt more than you do wearing *that* Arctic Monkeys T-shirt.'**

**Do you think that the artists you work with have to do more than the music itself to reach mainstream audiences and achieve what is deemed successful?**
We're living in an era where you walk around and see people locally wearing *that* Balenciaga T-shirt more than you do wearing *that* Arctic Monkeys T-shirt. The music industry has to be receptive to that. You could see the cultural pathways of this consumer phenomena arising through Kanye, the Kardashians, Nike x Off-White, Frieze Art Fair, Kendrick performing at Louis Vuitton, Coachella… There's no one particular event or moment because a global phenomena is a collective cultural and financial pattern. Artists have to do more than the music today. I still think there's more intrigue for mystery as long as the art is marketed on the level that it's meant to be on. You can't deny good music, there's no way to hide it. Songs that travel the globe, anthems, 'music of the highest calibre' – that shit doesn't fly under the radar. And once that artist reaches their optimum musical output, that's when the adjacent floodgates you're referring to open themselves up. You don't just have the internet and Instagram anymore, that's not enough, you've got five different social-media platforms, you've got Twitch, you've got all these things that are now part of the consumer's handbook. These all count towards measuring artist credibility. Social media is being treated as a precious artefact to monetize art.

**Have there been moments when you find it problematic that an artist can record what you think is the greatest record of their career and yet, they are being encouraged to do more outside of the actual music to reach the label's expectation of global success?**
I think it depends on the artist. You have Drake who is one of the biggest artists in the world and he's very forward-facing, he's very active on social media, you see him everywhere. You have Kendrick who you don't really see that much, his music and live shows do most of the marketing so he doesn't have to. You have Travis who moves tons of products; he's one of the biggest artists in those terms. All these artists are different and it really is an extension of their interests, so it has to be natural. You can't sell something that's not part of the aspirational evolution of the individual artist. You have J. Cole, who's one of the greatest rappers of all time but he doesn't give a shit, he's not playing that game. You have The Weeknd, whom I don't know if he's ever done an in-depth interview but his music is everywhere. You don't really see him. You don't really hear from him, you don't really know him. You don't know Abel, you only know The Weeknd. You can't smell any suspicious motives coming from any of those artists. There's no commercial stench. The greater the artist, the greater their contribution to the zeitgeist around them because they know how to move between this high-speed culture that has proved the ultimate career challenge for any aspiring creative.

**Do you find that artists such as The Weeknd have this 'intentionally absent' aura to maintain? Has this made it difficult for them to change their persona as their influence grows, where they may have a desire to venture into other fields? Does that make the allure less alluring?**
That's a good question. The quicker an artist commercializes themselves, the stronger the connection with their audience because they have globalized their monopoly on their own terms. That means if they want to change their persona, or take on a collaboration, because they aren't the new kids on the block anymore and they've earned a certain degree of trust, they can move between this landscape of expression through hybridity. As long as the music stays first and remains great then I think all other avenues are open. However, it could be a case of, 'never meet your idols.' The mystery is part of the allure. It's a case by case thing. We always think we want more from people until we get it. That's the human experience. We, the

consumers, are 'culture vultures' – that's until we've consumed all of our prey.

**With that in mind, what are the important factors for an artist's longevity?**
Experimentation, curiosity, not being afraid to fail and not trying to please everybody. Knowing how to dip in, do something, drop out, and circle back again. Knowing that you can do that and you don't have to make so much right here right now to gain traction. Where there used to be a dozen competitors, there's now a multitude. I mean, it's the same with fashion. How many aspirant stylists are there out there? Everyone's a creative director, or an art director, or a blogger, or an influencer. So, with that in mind, and given the repetitively cyclical nature of these creative constructs, it can actually become easier to stand out if you ignore the sea of competition, or you bite the bullet of robo-culture. The way in which an artist presents their work has to become intrinsic to their whole formulation. The music they play has to embody an entire expression. Longevity is subject to the totality of an artist – it's the opposite of riding the crest of a current wave but rather orchestrating viscerality into presentation.

**Have there been situations with the artists you work with where you've become a close adviser, part-time therapist and casual best friend?**
That's usually how it starts. I think people are very leery. Before, people just wanted to be signed by labels. That was the easiest thing to get done. Now everyone wants to have loads of 'friends'. People want to be noticed by everyone around them. They usually have an entourage and I'm sensitive to the fact that I'm someone who has a reputation – and I think it's a good one – for helping artists, especially artists that most people once deemed anomalies. There was a time when Travis Scott was an anomaly. Need I say any more? No matter how much you care about an artist or whether you're an 'artist-forward' person, you still work for the big, bad monster.

**The big, bad monster being the record label – the industry?**
Yes. You know, the one that wants to take your art and put glitter all over it and sell it all over the world. By the way, that's what they all fucking want. However, the labels want to do it their way. Most of them have zero idea how to do it because they don't want the artists to take their time or do it with the music that *they* want to put out. There's this constant struggle and I get it, because I see both sides of the conundrum, but I'm always going to be a proponent of letting the artist do what the artist needs to do to get the music to a place within the upper echelon.

**There's a juxtaposition at play here, because on one hand any major record label wants to monopolize every artist they sign, or buy in to cash out. On the other hand, with the artist discovery process being driven by social media, artists are less dependent on being noticed by one label. Technology gives them options they wouldn't have had 30 years ago. Would you say that artists are now able to make more conscious decisions?**
Here's the thing: no one's that patient. Everyone screams 'I'm independent' and that all sounds fucking amazing but it doesn't resemble much sense of reality. I don't know any artist that doesn't want to be the most important, or the biggest artist in the world, or have their music reach and be loved by as many people as possible. Any artist that says they're not, I don't believe them, I just think that they're fucking scared. They're scared to do what it takes to be on a level where you're being rejected by the establishment. Or scared to do what it takes to get to that point where you're being offered a performance at the next Louis Vuitton show, or a collaboration with Nike. It takes a lot of work to be a huge global artist. There's a lot of legwork done that does not involve any music whatsoever. Some people are going to be like, 'I'm cool with my music living where it is and reaching who it reaches, and I'll travel and tour and I'm okay with that.' But if any artist tells you to take any one record that they put out and not have it be the biggest record in the world, you're telling me there's an artist that would say no to that? I think not.

> **'If you're making music and you don't look the part then you're not giving fans the full experience, because it's all entertainment at the end of the day.'**

**How do you know when an artist that you've discovered is at that tangible moment you're describing – when they're ready to play on that level?**
That all starts with due diligence. An artist needs to reach a point of self-maturity where they become innately aware that the label has made a judicious acquisition without losing themselves in the opulence. It's the same as buying a Sterling Ruby quilt. It would be easy for me to be snobbish about it but that's not the point. It's a matter of when they've paid their dues, they're then ready to enter that level you're describing. Or, they've made a song that piqued my interest enough to think, 'Okay, this song is the predominant genesis for everything that's going to come after it.' Those are the moments that I look for in the artists who have the tangibles to succeed. When I heard Bakar for the first time, I couldn't put a trace on him but when I heard the song *Unhealthy*, I felt he was onto something and this is the precipice of his musical blueprint. This is like the strand of DNA that's going to mould the rest of his career.

**When we first spoke about putting this story together, you mentioned how you've found yourself in situations where an artist has come to you for styling, or ideation around their image, where your relationship exceeds any limitations surrounding the traditional A&R role – certainly transcending any musical advice. Can you expand on this?**
Myself, Acyde and Tremaine are all very different with our own personal styling but we're all very staunch about it at the same time. It's a situation of, 'We're all cool now. Everyone's got cool.' Because the manipulation of identity has become such standard practice, so how do we make what you're referring to feel a little less anodyne? We have opinions on how people look and how we look, so I feel like it's my duty to give these guys a leg up in the world they're playing in. We can't be walking around with an artist that doesn't look right.

**Which recording artist have you been most impressed by in terms of their input into your work together and their creative ambitions?**
I'll give you an example. When Kendrick was recording *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, his reference was: 'I want to make the best album ever made, you know what I'm saying?' That was his vision and when somebody tells you that, you know they mean it. When somebody tells you, 'I'm going to make the best album ever made' as opposed to, 'I want to make the best album ever made' you know what kind of ride you're embarking on. It goes back to what I was saying about an artist's ambitions and reaching that esoteric stage of self-awareness.

**Do you think that can still be defined as challenging the system? Do you think it's a healthy thing?**
Widening the conversation or widening our cultural lexicon through the democratization of culture is always a healthy way of thinking even if everything is now so grossly commercialized. When an album like *good kid, m.A.A.d city* reaches those heights, that should be the goal every time. Who wants to go into a studio and say, 'I just want to make a good album.' Do you want to work with that artist? I don't! When someone like Kendrick says that, you know he's going to do everything it takes to get there.

> **'I think it's easier for a top-tier musician to have a clothing line than it is for a Martine Rose to make an album. What we're dealing with here is fandom.'**

**Have there been instances with the artists you work with where your role has segued to how they want to supplement their core income, or is it more often a question of you guiding them towards specific opportunities that you feel will be beneficial?**
If an artist wants something, or they have an idea and I have the key to that gate, I'm going to open it. Or if I have an idea for an artist and they may not see themselves in that way, my job is to drive that home. That's literally my fucking job. It's different because it spans so many areas but if my job was to only help an artist make music and I have a bunch of different avenues for them, then I will give them the best possible chance for success and that means anything that the artist is involved in. Everybody wants to be on the inside. That's what's driving it: the artist feels they are on the outside and they want to be on the inside. It's connoisseur culture and everybody wants to engage with it. My interactions with an artist are curatorial. It is engagement work so that the creative result has an interactive quality that audiences can see manifest through art practice.

**What do you think about those artists who are more concerned with the intersection of entertainment and fashion?**
How many actors have you seen try to make music and it doesn't work out? So in my specific field of duty, I've noticed that it's much easier for a musician to become an actor than it is for an actor to become a musician – unless you're Joaquin Phoenix playing Johnny Cash. Whereas fashion makes everything easier because it creates this social safety net. It has a higher bandwidth. I think it's easier for a top-tier musician to have a clothing line than it is for a Martine Rose to make an album. What we're

dealing with here is fandom. Clothing brands create avatars of affiliation because people buy into labels. People queue outside stores and the only thing that brokers this demand is brand identity. If you took all the labels out and placed them in a stockroom, then consumers would have to think whether they actually like the product before buying it. Fandom is the CliffsNotes to culture. If you have a fanbase, then you can sell things. If you have a big fanbase, you can sell more things because you're popular. Popular culture is king. So naturally, for an artist that tours the world and makes millions per show, the idea that you could sell that merchandise outside of tours isn't that far-fetched.

**From your perspective, what does fashion offer to your artists and the services you provide them?**
A sense of expression that can enhance or cement their art. I feel like if there is a connection between what you're saying and the way that you look, then it just enforces the sentiment or perspective of the music. If you're making music and you don't look the part then you're not really giving the fan the full experience, because it's all entertainment at the end of the day. The pageantry is a part of the fabrication of an artist; if you're an artist and people don't want to be you then you're not going to be very big. We're no longer living in the 1960s, where there were what appeared like these esoteric rock stars on stage whilst the audience was still wearing everyday casualwear.

**When does the acceleration of cool cease to accelerate?**
People gotta wanna be you. That's when it stops.

**What do you think of instances such as when the Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist, Flea, starred in the campaign for the Dries van Noten collaboration for Stüssy? Brands such as these have been instrumental in evolving the notion of celebrity, or musician, from an afterthought to a core marketing component. How do they go about maintaining the success of this formula?**
Brands like Stüssy were formed from a point of counterculture to what can now be referred to as 'over-the-counter culture'. They found a hole in the market so they created something out of a necessity to speak for a certain demographic. Granted they became huge juggernauts because they were driven by the culture that they represented and they went to musicians because there was a cultural identifier that they weren't tapping into. That's truly what the essence of collaboration is until everything becomes bastardized. It becomes a money play but when it's done right, it generates what I like to call it 'sonic youth culture', but that seems vintage now. Whilst instances like the one you're describing reveal this instant connection between the youth, brand affiliation and monetization, where the quicker they commercialize them, the quicker they sell out, they originate from a point of authenticity. Flea, Stüssy and Dries Van Noten tell us something about the evolution of the youth market. Everything goes now because of this landscape of hybridity – to be esoteric is to lose your audience.

**Seeing how the fashion and entertainment industries have, in parts, become much the same, if you were to strip away the ephemera and financial trappings of this intersection, what kind of industry would remain today?**
If you find yourself at the intersection of art and commerce, then prepare to have your heart broken.

HOW MUSIC WORKS
DAVID BYRNE
flim-flam man
The Tao of Bill Murray
MURMURS OF EARTH
THE VOYAGER INTERSTELLAR RECORD
CARL SAGAN
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF RECORDING ARTS & SCIENCES
BROCK KORSAN
Songwriter
BEST RAP SONG – 2018
GOD'S PLAN
(Drake)

# ‘Zendaya is the golden ticket.’

Talent-brand deal broker Youssef Marquis and celebrity ‘image architect’ Law Roach discuss fashion’s lucrative dealings with entertainment.

Interview by Osman Ahmed
Portraits by Christophe Coënon

Fashion and celebrity have always been comfortable bedfellows. For as long as there have been Hollywood starlets, there have been designers to dress them, both for the screen and for a life in the tabloids. In the age of screenwriter strikes and social media, however, the relationship between the two notoriously adjacent industries has solidified from a freewheeling love affair into what can often feel like an arranged marriage of convenience, with dowries and matrimonial duties etched out in watertight contracts, digital metrics, and a unionized army of stylists and marketing executives. A sheen of hyper-produced polish now lacquers every interaction between celebrity and fashion house, from appearances in campaigns to the carefully placed handbags spotted in paparazzi shots.

> **'Making the right choice of talent for a brand is a kind of instinctive science, a magic that not everybody has, and that Law and I do.'**

Every star has a price. During the biannual couture shows in Paris, in June 2023, one unfiltered, flame-haired American actor announced to neighbouring editors and influencers on the front row: 'I was paid $240,000 to be here; I don't know what the rest of you are doing here.' Meanwhile, The Business of Fashion has posted about reports that Timothée Chalamet's contract with Chanel – as the face of Bleu, its men's fragrance – is worth an unprecedented 35 million euros. And according to the media outlet Parfumini, Chalamet's *Dune* co-star Zendaya's deal as a brand ambassador for Louis Vuitton clocked in at a similar sum, accounting for red-carpet appearances, campaigns and show attendance. Two of the engineers of that latter deal sat down with *System* to discuss the changing nature of fashion's lucrative dealings with entertainment: Law Roach, Zendaya's self-described 'image architect', and Youssef Marquis, the former Louis Vuitton and Givenchy communications executive; who launched his namesake agency in 2023 to broker deals between predominantly LVMH-owned fashion houses and stars from the worlds of film, music, and sports.

The two have collaborated before, having engineered the partnership between Ariana Grande and Givenchy. And more recently, when Youssef was consulting on the front row talent for Jacquemus' Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 show, held on the grounds of the Palais de Versailles, he invited Roach to attend as a 'VIP talent'; in doing so, adding a further layer to the ever-evolving chicken-or-egg conundrum of who holds the power: the celebrity or the designer, the stylist or the PR, the marketing executive or the Hollywood agent. In conversation, they discuss exactly that, reflecting on the changes in the last decade that have culminated in peak fashion-entertainment crossovers, and where things go from here.

**Osman Ahmed: I want to start with a simple question for both of you. What is it that you do?**

**Law Roach:** I don't know what to call it… maybe a 'connector', or something. I'm more like a consultant, and I'm still always working with Zendaya as her creative director and stylist, in some capacity. For me, I had hit a ceiling as a stylist, there was nowhere bigger to go. And I think the older you get and the more you sacrifice, you're looking for things that satisfy you and let you be creative in a different way. That forced me to take a break, to rethink and strategize, and that's what I'm in the midst of now, thinking about this different position, being more of a connector; strategizing the right talent with the right brands, and using my relationships with agencies like Marquis.

**Youssef Marquis:** Law created something new in our world, with this notion of 'image architecture'. It was more than getting a dress and getting it worn to this or that event. The notion in image architecture that I think is the most important, is that it's creating the way you elevate a building from the ground up; creating an image from the very start. But sometimes it's a rebrand of a personality.

**Law:** That's what I sought to do in my career and I did it a few times, but I'm still in a bit of limbo where I'm just trying to figure it out.

**Youssef:** And in terms of what I do, I did 15 years in strategic comms positions at different LVMH brands. When I decided to create an agency this year, it was because I felt like celebrity became a signature thing over the years. The matchmaking of it all – making the right choice of person for a brand, that can carry through time and carry the right values – that's a kind of instinctive science, a magic that not everybody has, and that we do because we are at the crossroads of fashion and entertainment. After so many years of doing those deals and planning those coups – be it Madonna at the Super Bowl or Meghan Markle at the Royal Wedding – I felt it was interesting that there was no structure that would serve as a connector between the very complicated worlds of fashion and entertainment. Law and I can connect these two worlds, and not a lot of people get to do that. We are also very close friends in real life, but we turned that into a business. When a consumer sees a celebrity as the face of a brand, it really seems as simple as 'this brand has booked this person, and therefore they are on the red-carpet wearing x designer.' But that's not the case.

> **'When I first started dressing Céline Dion all the brands were telling me no. I couldn't believe it. I'm like, 'It's Céline Dion – are you crazy?''**

**What would you say goes into this art of matchmaking?**

**Law:** Being close with the talent and having a feel for the DNA of a brand, you want to try to put your talent somewhere that fits right. The DNA of the brand shouldn't be so different from that of the talent. That's one of the reasons why I think it's really important to have those real introductions, to make sure that the creative director and talent actually like one another, or at least have some genuine commonalities. You want it to feel more like a real relationship than just a business deal. You don't want it to feel transactional – although it is; in more ways than one. When Youssef and I worked on Ariana Grande for Givenchy, one of the things that made it right was Ariana's love for the heritage of that brand, and seeing herself almost like a young reincarnation of Audrey.

**Youssef:** As Law says, sometimes they're contractual and business or money-oriented, but sometimes they're fully organic. Sometimes we work with a brand that is not going to be paying a talent, where it's just a pure connection of, 'We think this is right for you and you should do it because it fits, even though it doesn't mean a contract right now. But it might put you on the scene in a certain way and mean a contract with someone else in three years.' During my Givenchy tenure – this was more than ten years ago – we would be dressing Rooney Mara, who came out with *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and we'd dress her for every single red carpet. There was no contract. It was just that she was so Givenchy in essence, that she felt it and we all felt it. And it led to her being the face of the brand's fragrance six or seven years later. Sometimes it's just the pure creativity that drives it, and we're there to guide the talent and the brand.

**Law:** Those make the best relationships, because I also feel that when things don't fit, the consumer knows. They can sense when there's no authenticity in the relationship. So, my job is always to create relationships that make sense, where there's some love on both sides. The customer today is, like, 'Why is she wearing that dress? Why is she dealing with that brand? Why did she become the face?' The 'why' is more important than anything else. And with social media, everyone has a platform to have an opinion, and you want the opinions to sway in favour of the choices that you have made.

**When you consider how those relationships have shifted, what do you think are the biggest changes in the past decade in this dynamic between Hollywood and fashion?**

**Youssef:** Social media has obviously changed the way brands look at things, because now there are metrics. When I first started with Alber Elbaz at Lanvin, there was no social media and we were still getting requests via fax or even by post. We sent clothes out on the red carpet, but we didn't have the tools to know what it would bring us. These days, when Zendaya goes to a Louis Vuitton fashion show, they receive the number of impressions and likes; they get all sorts of engagement metrics. So they know what works and what doesn't. It doesn't mean the metrics should take over everything – sometimes you're trying something that is not understood yet, and it will succeed later – but it does mean that the brands can see if their engagement with an ambassador pays off. That's the big difference, and it's shrunk the opportunities for big organic relationships to develop, because you know exactly what works and what doesn't. But there's still a lot of opportunities for beautiful moments to happen by themselves. When you have someone like Kim Kardashian – who's a fashion monster; she thrives on it – she has her campaigns and her contracts, but sometimes she is going to have a big moment with a brand for a long time. People think it's contractual but it's purely because she believes in the product. Those things still happen, but they've become rarer with the rise of metrics.

**The Kardashian 'Dolce & Gabbana wedding' is a good example of that. And I heard that was organic.**

**Youssef:** Domenico [Dolce] is a friend.

But you know, in the same way they did Madonna with Meisel in the 1990s; today they're doing a Kardashian wedding that turns into a bigger deal. But it did start from a place of, 'We love what this is, and we love the aesthetics of it.' My point is, sometimes what matters the most is still what it looks like rather than what is written on a contract.

**Do you have any thoughts to add to that, Law? What are the changes you've seen?**
**Law:** I think there have been some good changes. I think who we see as the faces of these brands has changed a lot, in terms of inclusivity and diversity, which is great. But there is also the rise of social media where a lot of influencers are getting more of these opportunities. It's kind of a double-edged sword, right? You want to be happy for people who get certain opportunities. But if you started in this industry at a certain time, and you know the amount of work that you and your talent had to put into it to get to a certain place, and then you see it kind of handed to somebody… You don't want to feel jaded about the industry that you love so much. But you must also be realistic when it comes to paying attention to what's happening in the industry. There have been good changes and bad.

> **'A big influencer in China held dozens of products up on-screen for no more than three seconds, and made 18 million euros in her live feed.'**

**Youssef:** I would also add, like, seeing Hunter Schafer be the face of such giant brands [Prada and Mugler Fragrance] means a lot. It shows how far we've come in terms of representation. With all of the brands that come to me to cast for their big projects, I can tell that, systemically, the vision has evolved. The good side of social media is that you're allowed to be who you are; it puts everybody on the same level. Your metrics matter, but your gender doesn't, and neither does your shape.

**What would you say is the biggest criteria for brands in a talent that they are looking for?**
**Youssef:** I'm going to be very cynical, but this is the truth: it is followers. That is the first thing that comes up in a casting brief; the reach. But second to that is status, which can express itself in a million different ways. Cate Blanchett doesn't have Instagram, but what she doesn't have in followers, she makes up for in status because she's the biggest actress in the world. Meryl Streep doesn't have Instagram, and it doesn't matter. Some rare unicorns like Zendaya have all of that combined and so, of course, they're the golden ticket. But there are, like, fifteen of them in the world, maybe not even. The brands fight for them, and they're always going to be the priority. But the obsession with followers does not close the conversation. A lot of the big faces that you see today, like Emma Stone, don't necessarily have an Instagram presence, and that's ok.

**I think one of the biggest changes that we've seen in the past ten years is that celebrities within a Hollywood system or a pop record label system have started behaving more like influencers. The way they project themselves on social media is based on what bloggers did once upon a time; this kind of genre of imagery. What do you make of that?**
**Law:** Things have changed: it's not about talent anymore, it's about consistency. I do understand and appreciate the hard work that goes into it, but that's not talent really to me. I struggle with that because it reminds me of something Sophia Loren said in the 1960s. They asked her about the new generation of girls coming behind her and how someone learns to be as talented as her. And she said, 'You don't learn talent, you learn technique.' I think a lot of things that people are being rewarded for is more technique than talent, because talent is something you're born with. You can be a perfect dancer, technically, but the person that's next to you might be born with a talent that you'll never be able to attain. When people get rewarded just for technique, for studying somebody else and doing whatever they create, I'm just so torn about it. I see myself as a creative and a talent; I learned a lot of things on my own, I didn't belong to anyone's legacy, I built my own infrastructure. You want to be forward-thinking and say, 'Oh, well, that really kind of opened up more ways for other people to enter the industry and become successful.' You want to be happy about that, but it's almost like they take a piece of you.
**Youssef:** If I may add something, sometimes I'm very admiring of the disruption. I don't know if you guys saw on your phones this week an amazing influencer in China [Zheng Xiang Xiang] who had dozens of products and held them up on-screen for no more than three seconds, and made 18 million euros in her live feed within one week. She literally held them up and then threw them away. It was kind of taking the piss out of live shopping, but it actually worked. She made record-breaking amounts of money and you're almost like, 'yes, it's a bit of a fraud', but at the same time, 'you're amazing!'
**Law:** But then you have to think about the long-term effects of that, because now everybody thinks they can do it that way. I've always been considered a disruptor, because of where I'm from and how I present myself and all that. But there's no right or wrong answer.

**The nature of celebrity is really evolving and now you have a front row at most shows with a mix of actors, TikTokers, YouTubers, influencers.**
**Youssef:** I like that mix. I have to say I understand that sometimes it makes us scratch our heads. Especially because Law and I are of that generation in the middle, where we did work without our phones, but we are also young enough to comprehend it completely. In the late 2000s, when we were building a front row, it was all [adopts disgruntled tone], 'Oh my God, these brands are putting bloggers on the front row!' Then it became accepted because of the commercial reality of their power in the industry. At the end of the day, that's what the talents we work with do for the brands: they sell a dream for them. Those people never disappeared from the front rows, and I think they never ill, because to this day we haven't found another way to dream.

> **'Cate Blanchett doesn't have Instagram, but what she doesn't have in followers, she makes up for in status because she's the biggest actress in the world.'**

**Law:** It's the aspiration that they bring.
**Youssef:** I've seen the evolution of it. Even music is now completely accepted. But it wasn't before; there was a time when it was all about Hollywood stars being the holy grail. Then it was music, because those people were famous and connected to our everyday lives. In the last 10 years it's opened up to reality TV. Now it's opening to sports; a lot of brands come to me saying, 'We want an athlete.' What we've seen in our careers is fashion becoming mainstream, where it became such an interesting art to audiences at large – the way movies and music used to be. People care about fashion across a much wider spectrum than when we started out. Social media, celebrities, and influencers made that happen. Whatever the reason, it became so big that in order to fulfil this mainstream need for attention, the brands needed mainstream figures to carry their messages. I'm very observant of where this takes us. Where do we find the next generation of talent?

**That is a good question. Do you think there are any corners of fame left to pillage for these brands?**
**Law:** I think sports was really smart. Brands had alienated them for so long, even though they have such a huge influence in pop culture. They would've been crazy not to start building relationships with these people that command millions and millions of dollars in purchasing power every year. I don't know whether that was a smart choice, or if it was forced. I remember doing men's fashion week, and there didn't used to be a lot of athletes there, even though they were the people who were buying the clothes. I remember when I first started dressing Céline Dion; it was the same idea. I was really excited. I was reaching out to all these brands, and all the brands were telling me no. I couldn't believe it. I'm like, 'it's Céline Dion – are you crazy?' I had a friend who worked at one brand who called me and said, 'Law, she spends so much money buying clothes that the sales team are afraid that if the brand starts lending her clothes, she won't buy as much.' While I understood that, I had become in charge of what she bought and what brands she spent with. And so, I told the brands, 'If you don't lend to her, she will never buy anything again as long as I work for her.' I had to kind of force them to change that way of thinking, because she had spent so much money over her career and now they weren't willing to lose that to loan her a few dresses; which she ended up buying anyway. Sometimes you have to disrupt the logic that these brands live by. But I don't know exactly where it will go after this: we already have the influencers, actresses, actors, musicians, athletes. Where do we go? I hope it won't be AI. I think about the stylists, hair and makeup, the people that do craft services – all those jobs will be lost if we move to digital campaigns, with one person behind a computer.
**Youssef:** Brands are using culture to differentiate themselves from one another, so it's more about specifics and niches. So a Hedi Slimane will focus on the rock scene and that's his thing. And I think the future will take us to more subcultures. One area that is very dear to me and to Law is the rap, hip hop, and R&B scene. That niche wasn't so popular in fashion until recent years, when Riccardo Tisci and others became the disruptors who really wanted to embrace it. And now it's all about Nicki

Minaj and Megan Thee Stallion. I think those niches will keep showing up. In sports, too. Some brands were like, 'Well, let me try putting some focus on soccer players and see how powerful it is.' Other brands will probably hit the basketball players or other athletes. The difference is where the brands specify and branch out. I also feel that there's still something with the art world, when I see brands like Louis Vuitton go into these giant blockbuster art collaborations, but also smaller ones. Something is going on there that people find very inspiring on a different level – the convergence of the art world and a commercial approach to fashion.

**I do wonder whether collaborations with niche artists has a future because, from my perspective, fashion has been broadening to a mass audience as much as possible. Brands no longer want to speak to a small group of people, however rich they are. I have been at shows in the last year where I've seen the creative director being introduced to stars they don't know, and they're kind of baffled. Meanwhile, the people screaming outside the venue don't know which show it is, but they know which K-pop star is in the building. I feel like we're at an inflection point in the dynamic between fashion and entertainment. It feels quite transactional. Do you feel that too?**

> **'I don't know where it will go after this: we already have the influencers, actresses, actors, musicians, athletes. Where do we go? I hope it won't be AI.'**

**Youssef:** I understand what you're saying about the chaos that we feel from K-pop descending on fashion, but at the same time, for years now, if not decades, brands have made more than half of their business in Asia. To see these brands represent talent from those areas of the world in their central Paris shows feels right. It feels like they're not just giving you a Western vision for you to consume at the other end of the world. It puts everybody on the same level. Everybody always complains when they go to the shows, because you have 6,000 people outside the show screaming for someone that most people won't know. But it will resonate with so many people back home that it's just too good not to happen in terms of influence.

**Law:** And it makes people feel good and, from the business side, it creates more brand loyalty. Like, what do I do to make people buy from Vuitton? Or Dior? What's the difference? Sometimes it's those choices of who you put in the front row, or whose face you put on the billboard. Nobody really needs luxury – luxury is a choice. So, it's like these brands have to do something. Asia has been such a huge factor for these brands for such a long time, so it just makes sense.

**Youssef:** Blackpink and BTS have set a precedent. At the same time, there is this feeling of chaos that you have now when you go to the big players, because these two big bands created something that took the brands by surprise in terms of their impact on consumer behavior – not only in Asia, but globally. All these different individuals in these bands are contracted with brands and locked in, so all the brands I work with are in fear of missing the next Blackpink. They would rather be chaotic than miss out, so they might not know who some of these people are at the shows, but at least they're in the game. If any of those people turn into the next big thing, they're in place.

**When it comes to a specific deal in which a talent is brought onto a brand, you both have a part to play in that. Law on the creative team; Youssef with the brand. How does a deal come to life?**

**Youssef:** It's about making sure that the fit is right, that the celebrity or the brand answers the brief for the specific service. Once all of that is done, what we work on is setting a parameter for the collaboration to happen in healthy circumstances. From the get-go, we discuss what the talent in question will have to do to represent the brand: how many campaigns, how many service days, how many events, how many red carpets. We describe the areas of restrictions, meaning where the talent is exclusive to the brand. Like for example, when you have a talent, you can have an exclusivity in jewellery but not in fragrance or in fashion. Once we get to an area of understanding, we present it – me to my brand, Law to his talent – and that's where we get the best compromise for everybody. Usually, that's how it goes.

**Law:** I also work with my talent to ensure that the creative fits their overall image. You have to ask yourself, 'Are the worlds going to collide in a way that feels organic to both brands?' That means the right hair, makeup, photographer, location.

**Do you find that the next generation of actors and musicians all aspire to have a brand deal?**

**Law:** Absolutely. A singer isn't just a singer now, right? A singer is a model. A singer is a brand. A singer is a designer. When we think about the people who we consider superstars, they encompass all of those things. I think that when young talents are considering what they want their careers to be, they're not thinking about it being contained in one genre.

**One thing about young stars is that they speak to a younger audience, and are more often politically engaged. How does that work within a brand deal where there might be restrictions on what they can say?**

**Youssef:** When the brands bet on younger talent, the talent is more inclined to follow the brand, because they're at a stage in their career where they're benefiting more from the brand's aura than vice versa. But there is a moment in that talent's career where those dynamics kind of invert. That's when things start to be interesting, because the talents become brands themselves. They have their own values; they know what they stand for, and how people see them. So, they don't really want to compromise on their own brand to service another one. That's where the conversations get interesting, because then the talent is powerful enough to express a view, and sometimes the brand will meet halfway. For example, Cate Blanchett is very vocal about the environment and sustainability and so she's pushed a lot of the brands I've seen her work with into that territory.

**Do you think celebrities are becoming more powerful than the brands? Where do you see that kind of balance swaying in terms of who's leading these kinds of conversations?**

**Law:** [Laughs] It depends who you're asking! I believe both parties need each other equally. The partnership is what's important. That's why, in this type of deal, it's important to go to a brand where the voice of the talent will be heard and their opinions will be listened to; where there is room for compromise and collaboration. In a situation like that, you don't have to worry about that type of question, because value is being added on both sides.

**Youssef:** Go back 20 years, to when there was no social media, and brands needed the media to convey messages to their audiences because they had no direct connections. Now the relationship to media is a little different, and they use people to speak *for* them to their audiences, their followers. Also, a brand now has exact data, like, 'My audience is 60% women in America,' or whatever it is. I get briefs from clients all the time, like, 'We're lacking presence in Latin America, and in the Middle East,' because they've seen it from the data. So they want to get ambassadors in those regions who are going to be able to speak for them. In that sense, I feel like the talent has become of extreme importance, because it's the latest way of amplifying your voice as a brand.

**Is there an example of something that you've worked on together that signals the way these new values and dynamics that are coming into play?**

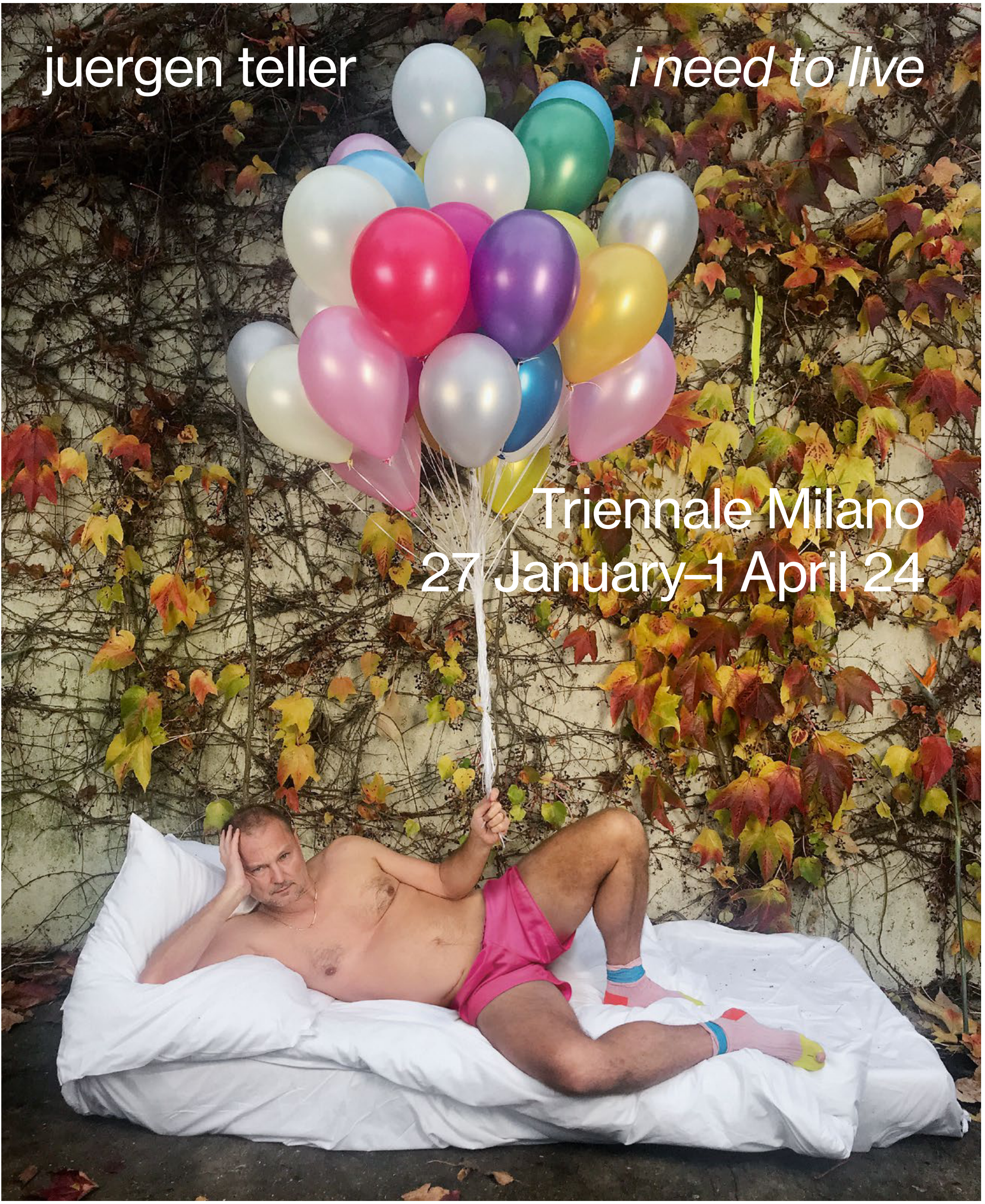
**Youssef:** The last Jacquemus show in Versailles, where I was working on the front row. Law is an icon and a great presence for a front row for any show, but they were specifically happy to have him be there. It signals where things are going: mega-stardom is what will matter to the biggest brands, always, but the agile way for brands that don't have the same means is to go for influential people in their sphere; people that have something meaningful to say or that stand for something special, which is what Law represents.

**Law:** Thank you, that was beautiful. But you know what? It was smart. Sometimes the brands get out of touch when it comes to who they put on the front row. I'm gonna speak for all stylists: we are the connectors, we are the true influencers, right? We are the brand-makers and the deal-makers. And I don't think that we always, as a whole, get our proper respect for doing that, you know? People forget that 90% of the time, talent doesn't really choose that rail of clothes that the final outfit is chosen from. They might choose the final outfit, but that entire rail was chosen by someone else. And those brands that go on those rails were chosen by the stylist. When brands give appreciation to the stylist, it makes sense to me. It's frustrating sometimes when someone gets a fashion icon award, right? When my client got it – because we are so synonymous with each other – people already knew, 'That's him and her,' right? But sometimes I feel jaded for other stylists when they're not mentioned in a way that really shows appreciation. A brand will say, 'Oh my God, I want to send flowers to this person', or, 'I want to gift this person.' And I'm, like, 'But, you know she didn't pick that outfit, right?' At the end of the day, the stylist is the one who is really making the connection.

**Last question: when your client signs with a brand, are you working for the brand, or for the client? And who has the ultimate sign-off?**

**Law:** I can only speak for me: I'm always on the side of the talent. The talent is always my boss. I'm in collaboration with the brand, but I am working for the talent.

**Youssef:** We try to make sure that the creative director, the designer of the brand, is heard and is happy. But ultimately, no one forgets that the person who is actually going to wear the dress on the red carpet is the person who's going to wear it, so they have the final sign-off. But the talent, in most cases, is naturally very receptive to pleasing the vision of the designer. Really, it's not as hard as you might think.



Triennale Milano
SAINT LAURENT

Photo: Francesca Beltran.

# The Fashiontainment Questionnaire: Olivier Rousteing

By Loïc Prigent

**On a scale of one to ten, how snobbish are you?**
Maybe a six. Anything less than five isn't healthy if you're a designer.

**How many fittings have you done today?**
Three. One womenswear, one menswear, and one for a top-secret special project.

**What meetings have you had today?**
My first was a boxing session. My second was at the American Hospital because I fell on my knee while running on the treadmill. Then I met with the Balmain president to discuss the 2024 strategy, then meetings with my marketing and PR team, my accessories team and the production team to discuss the next menswear show. And then I met with my tax lawyer, which was less fun.

**What's your favourite fact about Pierre Balmain?**
Professionally, his sense of tailoring was sharp and incredibly detailed. On the personal side, he was very mysterious, shy, and discreet about his personal life. The total opposite of me!

**Do you have Beyoncé stored in your phone contacts?**
I do. But when she calls me the contact name just comes up as 'B'. Then I realized that I also have France's First Lady [Brigitte Macron] under 'B'. So when a call comes in that says 'B', I don't know if it's the First Lady or Beyoncé calling me.

**What would the title of your autobiography be?**
Can I have two? Either *No matter where you come from, just know where you want to go*. Or *I would rather to be hated for who I am than be loved for who I'm not.*

**What do you do with your old clothes?**
I keep them all at home. Even the ones I don't wear anymore, whether that's because they're no longer my style, or I'm not skinny enough to get into them. I don't want to give them away because they all represent part of my journey, and I don't want to forget that.

**Who's on top of your Spotify Wrapped for 2023?**
Beyoncé's *Alien Superstar*, then Miley Cyrus, then Taylor Swift, and then loads of Michael Jackson and Prince.

**What's your drag queen name?**
I don't have one. Should I invent one? Err… 'Dramatica'!

**What did Pierre Balmain teach you?**
He's taught me what I would say in French as '*la résilience*'; never give up, no matter what.

**What are you most proud of?**
Being a Balmain boy for 15 years. I hadn't even realized it was that long until my LinkedIn popped up on my phone the other day and said 'Happy Birthday! You've been at Balmain for 15 years – since November 2008.'

**What do you buy at Chanel?**
What *don't* I buy?! Sunglasses, beach bags, all the leather bags, jewellery, fragrance, all the *minaudières* purses, T-shirts, but no tweed jackets yet.

**What do you buy at Rick Owens?**
Sunglasses, T-shirts, beautiful jackets, my high-heel shoes, sneakers…

**What do you steal at Balmain?**
I *buy* at Balmain! I mean, it's basically my entire wardrobe: bags, shoes, tailoring, sunglasses, T-shirts, denim, sweatshirts, jewellery…

**Who is your influence?**
Karl Lagerfeld. I mean, he's just so iconic. No one can top him.

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